

Chapter One

FDR AND IBN SAUD, 1744 TO 1953

It was an extraordinary meeting during an extraordinary trip. On January 22, 1945, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt left the White House secretly by train for Newport News, Virginia, where he boarded an American naval cruiser, the USS *Quincy*. Ten days later, on February 2, the *Quincy* docked in Malta, where the president transferred to the first presidential aircraft, the *Sacred Cow*, to fly to Yalta in the Crimea for a top-secret conference with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and British prime minister Winston Churchill. FDR hoped this meeting would build a new world order to prevent another global catastrophe like the Second World War. The Yalta summit finished on February 11 and FDR flew to Cairo for one more vital meeting.¹

On February 14, 1945, as the Second World War was coming to an end, President Roosevelt met with King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al Saud in Egypt, and the two forged a partnership that has endured, despite occasional severe strains, for the last seventy years. Even today, every Saudi official recalls the meeting vividly. Photos of the two leaders together are ubiquitous in



Franklin Roosevelt and Ibn Saud meeting aboard the USS Quincy, February 14, 1945. (FDR Presidential Library)

Saudi embassies, and the American ambassador's residence in Riyadh is named after the cruiser on which the two held their summit.

The American-Saudi summit meeting was a closely held secret for security reasons; only a handful on each side knew it was coming. Germany was in the final agony of defeat, but it still had sharp claws, U-boats and jet fighters that could surprise an unwary opponent. FDR and Ibn Saud, as the king was known in the world by 1945, met on the USS *Quincy*, the cruiser that brought FDR across the Atlantic and then back again to America, in the Great Bitter Lake along the Suez Canal.

Roosevelt's health was very poor and he had only a few weeks to live. The trip was grueling and dangerous; FDR would travel 13,842 miles through a chaotic war zone. Churchill would later write that FDR "had a slender contact with life." His blood pressure was 260 over 150.² The USS *Quincy* was surrounded by other cruisers and destroyers with an air cap overhead of fighter planes. German U-boat submarines were a constant menace. The president stayed in constant contact with the White House map room by cable, and through the map room's cables he was kept up-to-date on the progress of the war.

Ibn Saud had come from Jidda on an American destroyer, the USS *Murphy*, with an entourage of bodyguards, cooks, and slaves, plus an astrologer, a for-

tuneteller, and other retainers—and some sheep. The *Murphy* was the first-ever American Navy vessel to visit Jidda. The Navy's only available charts dated from 1834. The king only reluctantly agreed to leave his wives behind in Jidda when he was told their privacy could not be assured in the crowded space of a destroyer. His brother Saud accompanied him as well as his son, Crown Prince Saud, and his interpreter. A senior member of the *ulema*, or clergy, was also in the king's party. Another son, Prince Faisal, stayed behind in Jidda to run affairs and communicated with the king's party every hour by radio to assure Ibn Saud that all was well in the Kingdom. It was the king's first trip outside the Arabian Peninsula aside from a brief visit to Basra in Iraq and his first time to travel at sea.

The two leaders were remarkably different. FDR was the scion of one of America's most famous families. He had grown up in the most modern country in the world and the oldest democracy. After a failed run at vice president in 1920 and a paralyzing polio attack in 1921 he had gone on to win four elections for the presidency. He had led America out of the Great Depression and then through the fire of World War II. He had traveled the world and was, in 1945, undoubtedly the most powerful man in the world.

Ibn Saud had been born in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula, one of the most backward and impoverished lands in the world. He, too, was a scion of a famous family, but it had fallen on hard times and was living in exile in Kuwait. Ibn Saud had restored his family's rule in the Arabian Peninsula, fought numerous battles, and had gone on to expand the borders of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to dominate the peninsula. He had a prodigious sex life, producing forty-three acknowledged sons and at least fifty-five daughters. He told a confidant, the Englishman Harry St. John Philby, that he had "married no fewer than 135 virgins."³ His kingdom was an absolute monarchy, desperately poor but sitting on incredible riches in oil. FDR was the first foreign head of state Ibn Saud had ever met. In 1945 there were only 400 foreigners in all of Saudi Arabia, about one hundred of whom were Americans in the oil fields near Dhahran.⁴

FDR came to the Great Bitter Lake to see Ibn Saud as part of the mission that had taken him to Yalta, fashioning the postwar world. At Yalta he had focused on creating the United Nations to provide the framework for the new political order that would come after the worst war in human history. In the

Suez Canal he was seeking to ensure Saudi support for that order through a bargain that would trade American security guarantees for access to Saudi oil, and Saudi political support for stability in the Middle East.

Oil was very much on Roosevelt's mind. The huge armies, air forces, and navies of the Second World War were fueled by oil—no longer by coal and horsepower, as their predecessors had been. At the peak of military operations in 1944 in Europe, for example, the daily requirement of oil for the U.S. Army and Air Force in just that theater of the global conflict was fourteen times the total amount of gasoline shipped to Europe in the First World War. By 1945, some 7 billion barrels of petroleum had been required to support the allied war effort. American domestic production provided two-thirds of the global output and American refineries almost the entire refined product. Already American experts believed Saudi Arabia would prove to be the home of vast quantities of as yet unproven oil reserves. The Kingdom mattered enormously for postwar energy.⁵

Oil was also on the king's mind. He and his country were broke. The depression and the war had hurt Saudi Arabia badly. The British had been subsidizing the Saudis for years, but they, too, were broke. Only the United States had the resources to help the Saudi economy cope until oil production grew sufficiently to make the Kingdom solvent. Americans had found oil in Saudi Arabia and were exploring for more.

The king was also worried about the Kingdom's security as well as its economy. The Middle East was a rough neighborhood then and remains so now, and the king was well aware of his many enemies. The Hashemites, who ruled Jordan and Iraq and claimed their lineage had a direct family connection to the Prophet Muhammad, longed to recover the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina that Ibn Saud had seized from them two decades earlier. Yemen was a constant source of tension; Ibn Saud had taken territory from its rulers, as well. Even his putative ally Great Britain was an avaricious empire that might yet want Saudi oil. The Kingdom was vulnerable and needed an ally.

Roosevelt and Ibn Saud agreed to work together to ensure stability in the postwar Middle East. The United States would ensure security for the Kingdom, and the Saudis would ensure access to their oil fields. The United States acquired use of Dhahran air base for operations in the Middle East; U.S. oil companies were already operating in the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia declared war

on Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan two weeks later, thus securing a seat in the United Nations.

The *Quincy* summit was carefully planned in advance. Ibn Saud's son Prince Faisal, the future king, had visited the United States in November 1943 to begin the courtship. Faisal flew from the Kingdom through Africa to arrive in Miami before heading to Washington. Prince Faisal and his brother Prince Khalid, another future king, stayed at Blair House while meeting with President Roosevelt and senior executive and legislative officials. Faisal was only thirty-seven, but he had been serving as his father's top diplomat since 1919, when he was twelve and had traveled to London to discuss the future of the region after the First World War. After visiting Washington, Faisal and Khalid traveled to Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Colorado, Michigan, New York, New Jersey, and Maryland before flying to London. It was during Faisal's visit that the plans for the Dhahran air base were agreed upon and the United States began providing military assistance to the Kingdom.⁶ By the end of the war American lend-lease assistance to the Kingdom amounted to almost \$100 million.⁷ An American chargé d'affaires arrived in the Kingdom in 1943, the first American diplomat accredited to Saudi Arabia.⁸

Aboard the USS *Murphy* the king and his entourage slept and ate on the deck. They slaughtered a lamb they had brought with them and prayed five times a day, relying on the destroyer captain to tell them the direction to Mecca. Ibn Saud was introduced to apple pie à la mode and loved it. The king saw his first movie, *The First Lady*, a documentary about the aircraft carrier USS *Yorktown* fighting in the Pacific against the Japanese Imperial Navy. The one-hour Technicolor film had exciting scenes of aerial dogfights and crashes on the flight deck. Another American movie was shown to the king's entourage later, *Best Foot Forward*, a Lucille Ball musical comedy that featured a scene where her dress was ripped off. Ibn Saud's sons decided it was not fitting for their father.

Also on board the USS *Murphy* was America's consul to Saudi Arabia, Colonel William Eddy, a Marine hero of World War I. Eddy was born in Lebanon and spoke fluent Arabic. After his service in the First World War he taught at Dartmouth College and the American University of Cairo, then went on to be a college president. At the start of World War II he returned to active duty in the Marines and was assigned as naval attaché, first in Cairo and then

in Tangier. After the creation of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency, Eddy was assigned to the OSS. He played a central role in collecting intelligence in French North Africa before the Allied invasion in 1942, but his proposals to arm the Arab population against the French Vichy colonial government were regarded as too dangerous by the Allied military command, which did not want to encourage Arab nationalism.⁹ He acquired a reputation for espionage daring and expertise in Arabia. In 1943 Eddy was assigned to Saudi Arabia and in November 1944 he was promoted to the position of American chargé to the kingdom. After the war Eddy would play a part in the early development of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Eddy's account of the summit on the *Quincy* is the principle firsthand source of what happened there. On board the *Murphy* and the *Quincy* Eddy had the difficult duty of reconciling two strong traditions, those of the U.S. Navy and the House of Saud. He did so brilliantly.

On February 14 the two ships came together and Ibn Saud transferred to the USS *Quincy*. FDR sent his daughter Anna Roosevelt Boettiger, who was traveling with him, to Cairo for the day to shop, telling her that "this king is a Muslim, a true believer with lots of wives. As a Muslim he will not permit women in his presence when he is talking to other men."¹⁰ No guns were fired to salute the king, to maintain the secrecy about the meeting, and the two men began an informal discussion on the deck.

The king raised one issue at the start. He had received a message that British prime minister Winston Churchill wanted to see him in Egypt. Churchill had learned from FDR on the final day of the Yalta summit of FDR's upcoming visit to see Ibn Saud. Churchill was determined that the Middle East remain the sole preserve of the British Empire when the war ended, and he was not going to let FDR get a jump on London. The Saudis had had a difficult relationship with the British for decades, largely because the British backed their Arab rivals, the Hashemites, and sought domination of the Arabian Peninsula. Ibn Saud wanted FDR's advice: Should he meet with Churchill? The president, who increasingly regarded Churchill as a Victorian imperialist antique wedded to keeping the empire intact, told the king to see Churchill. He was, undoubtedly, confident that Churchill would misplay his meeting with the Saudis and only reinforce Ibn Saud's inclination to tilt to Washington.

Ibn Saud told the president that the two of them shared much in common, including infirmity. The king could walk only with difficulty, due to his age and many war wounds. FDR was paralyzed from the waist down. FDR gave Ibn Saud one of his extra wheelchairs on the spot to assist the king. It was to become a prized possession even though the king was too large to fit comfortably in the chair.

Lunch was served in the captain's mess below decks. On the way down in the elevator, FDR stopped the lift and smoked two cigarettes, having refrained from smoking in the king's presence. Lunch was prepared by the president's Filipino chefs from the White House. On the menu were curried lamb, rice, grapefruit, eggs, raisins, tomatoes, olives, pickles, chutney, and coconut. The king was so pleased that he asked if he could be given the chef as a gift. In the Kingdom, royal chefs were slaves. FDR cleverly told the king the chef had a contract with the U.S. Navy and could not break it.

After lunch the two went back on deck for a four-hour meeting with only Eddy present as the translator. Now that the two had established a personal connection and agreed that America and Saudi Arabia should be allies in the postwar world, Roosevelt wanted to raise another issue: the fate of Europe's Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

In Yalta the president had told Stalin he was going to see Ibn Saud and raise the question of a Jewish homeland for the survivors of the German concentration camps. Stalin said the Soviets had tried to create a Jewish homeland in Birobidzhan in Siberia. Stalin had created the Jewish Autonomous Oblast of Birobidzhan in 1934 as a bid to increase support for the Soviet Union among Russia's Jews, but the idea had never gotten much support, in part because Stalin was a notorious anti-Semite. FDR told Stalin he was a Zionist and that he hoped to convince Ibn Saud to support a Jewish homeland in Palestine.¹¹

In 1945 Saudi Arabia and Yemen were the only independent countries in the Arab world. The rest were colonies or protectorates of Britain, France, or Italy, their governments pawns of the European imperial powers. Egypt, for example, had a king put in power by the British army. FDR did meet with King Farouk on his trip to the Suez Canal, but Farouk had no credibility as an Arab leader and was rightly regarded as a British puppet.

Ibn Saud, on the other hand, was a credible defender of Arab and Islamic interests. He was not under British protection, although London liked to regard

itself as the preeminent power in the peninsula, and as a Wahhabi Muslim Ibn Saud was rightly seen as a “true believer,” as FDR had told his daughter Anna. If Ibn Saud could be persuaded to support a Jewish homeland in Palestine, it would be a major diplomatic coup for Zionism and for Roosevelt.

The president opened by saying he wanted to get the king’s advice on the question of Palestine and the Jews’ desire for a state there. The Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland had been liberated by the Red Army three weeks earlier, and the full extent of the Nazis’ mass murder was now becoming clear to the world. FDR argued the survivors should go to Palestine, where the Zionist movement had been building the basis for a Jewish homeland for decades.

The king was firm in his reply. “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 argued the Jews of Europe did not want to live in Germany. The king was unpersuaded, saying, “make the enemy and the oppressor pay; that is how we Arabs wage war. Amends should be made by the criminal, not by the innocent bystander. What injury have the Arabs done to the Jews of Europe? It is the Christian Germans who stole their homes and lives. Let the Germans pay.”¹²

Roosevelt tried another tack. The Arabs were numerous and their lands extensive; the Jews were few in number and sought only Palestine. The king looked FDR in the eye and quietly uttered one word: “No.”¹³ Then the president tried an idea that Churchill had suggested, that the Jews could build their state in Libya. Libya had been an Italian colony before the war and had a small population. Once again Ibn Saud rejected the notion of any part of the Arab world being ceded to the Jews. It would not be fair to the Libyan Arabs. “Give them [the Jewish survivors] and their descendants the choicest lands and homes of the Germans who oppressed them.”¹⁴

FDR decided to end this part of the conversation with a commitment to the king. He told Ibn Saud that as president “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.” His government “would make no change in its basic policy in Palestine without full and prior consultation with both Jews and Arabs.”¹⁵ The king was pleased with the president’s commitment.

The conversation finished with a discussion of the future of Syria and Lebanon, French trusteeships since 1919. Roosevelt assured the king that the United States would press the French to give them independence just as the United States was giving the Philippines its independence after the war. Ibn Saud said: "The USA never colonizes nor enslaves."¹⁶

The meeting then almost collapsed into failure. Roosevelt said he must start his voyage home (it would take sixteen days to sail back to Virginia). The king was appalled. Under Arab custom it was imperative that the king now host the president for a meal on the USS *Murphy*. The president had hosted him for lunch, now honor demanded the king host the president.

Always astute to the needs of his interlocutors, FDR said for security reasons the USS *Quincy* must leave. Ibn Saud turned to Eddy and blamed him for this insult, not the last time an ambassador was to take the blame for a decision he had no role in making. Then the king suggested a compromise: he would serve the president Arabian coffee. Two coffee servants appeared in minutes and poured the king and president cardamom-scented Arabian coffee.

Gifts were exchanged. The king gave FDR four complete sets of Arab robes, a solid gold knife, and a vial of perfume. His retainers also gave Anna and Eleanor Roosevelt Arab gowns, perfumes, bracelets, anklets, rings, pearl earrings, and belts. Roosevelt gave the king a gold medal and told him that he was also arranging for a twin engine DC3 to be provided to the Kingdom with an American crew for the king's use. When it arrived later it had a swivel throne chair so the king could always face Mecca while airborne. Finally, the president's navy physician gave the king's doctor a small box containing the new medicine penicillin. The king's doctor asked if it would cure venereal disease, and the physician said it would. The king was very impressed.¹⁷

Despite his poor health, FDR had been a masterful host. He used his famous charm with the king, he engaged intensively on the issues, and was keen to make a connection with the king. Eddy said later the president was in fine form although the strains of his years in office were also clear.¹⁸

When the two-day voyage ended, the king gave the *Murphy*'s captain a gold dagger, the other officers' Arab robes and watches engraved with Ibn Saud's name, and every member of the crew money in sterling. In return the destroyer's captain gave the king two submachine guns and a pair of Navy binoculars. It was a small start to America's arms relationship with the Saudis.

There was one final moment of drama. After the president's party had departed and the king was transferred to Cairo, his personal physician approached Eddy to report that the king's medicines had been inadvertently left on the *Murphy*. They had to be retrieved. Eddy immediately sent word to get them and also asked the chief medical officer of the U.S. Army in Cairo to review the list of medicines and see if they could be reproduced from U.S. military stocks. The army doctor reviewed the list and reported 210 of the 240 items on the list were aphrodisiacs, most of which were entirely phony and unavailable. Fortunately, the crew of the USS *Murphy* found the original medicines on the ship and they were returned without the king ever knowing of their loss. His doctor went on to be Saudi Arabia's ambassador to France.¹⁹

FDR found Ibn Saud to be a fascinating figure but a tough negotiator. After the five-hour meeting the president told his special adviser Bernard Baruch that "among all the men that I had to deal with during my lifetime, I have met no one than this Arab monarch from whom I could extricate so little: the man has an iron will."²⁰ In April, just a week before he died in Georgia, FDR wrote Ibn Saud a letter reaffirming 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." He promised full consultation on Palestine. The king believed Roosevelt's promise was binding on the American government.²¹

After the king and his entourage went back to the USS *Murphy*, they traveled to see Churchill in Egypt. The two met at the Hotel Auberge du Lac on the shore of Lake Karoun fifty miles south of Cairo. The meeting took place over lunch. During their luncheon Churchill smoked and drank champagne, and the Saudis felt insulted. Churchill's aides had told him smoking and drinking alcohol were offensive, but the prime minister responded, "No, I won't pull down the flag. I feel as strongly about smoking as His Majesty feels about not smoking." He told the king, "My religion prescribes as an absolute sacred rite smoking cigars and drinking alcohol before, after and if need be during all meals and intervals between them." The king offered Churchill a glass of water from a well in Mecca.²²

The Anglo-Saudi summit's substance was as troubled as its ambiance. Churchill also pressed for Saudi support for a Jewish state in Palestine. The prime minister told the king that the British Empire had been his ally for

twenty years, subsidizing the Kingdom for many of those years, and now wanted Saudi help as it dealt with the difficult situation in Palestine, which had been a British trusteeship since 1919. Churchill had helped implement Britain's commitment to a Jewish state in Palestine when he was minister for colonial affairs in the 1920s—indeed he had designed the British Empire's domination of the Middle East at a conference in Cairo in 1921.

As he had been with FDR, the king was blunt. He told Churchill that “promotion of Zionism from any quarter must indubitably bring bloodshed, widespread disorder in the Arab lands with certainly no benefit to Britain or anyone else.” Instead of agreeing to help smooth the way to a Jewish state, Ibn Saud asked for assurances from London that Jewish immigration to Palestine be stopped completely.²³

The king told Consul Eddy later that he was impressed at “the contrast between the President and Mr. Churchill. 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.” He concluded, “I have never met the equal of the President in character, wisdom and gentility.”²⁴

Even the British-Saudi parting was unpleasant. The king gave Churchill a sword and dagger set with jewels and a large diamond for Mrs. Churchill. Churchill gave the king a Rolls Royce automobile, but it was a right-hand drive. The king liked to sit in the front when he rode in a car, but if he sat to the left of the driver, in Arab culture he would be dishonored. The king never used the car. He also complained that the food on the British Royal Navy cruiser that took him home to Jidda was unpalatable.²⁵

Overall, Roosevelt's trip to Egypt to meet Ibn Saud was a success despite the differences over Palestine. The king's meetings with FDR and Churchill, in retrospect, can be seen as the initial passing of the torch of power in the Middle East from the United Kingdom to the United States. It would mark the beginning of the U.S. alliance with the Kingdom, America's oldest ally in the Middle East. Every king and every president since 1945 has reaffirmed the partnership begun on the *Quincy*.

The most concrete result of the summit on the *Quincy* was the construction of an American airfield in Dhahran. The formal agreement to build the

base was signed on August 5, 1945, by Eddy. The United States Air Force built more than fifty buildings, all air-conditioned, including a restaurant, hospital, movie theater, and housing for 500 personnel. The original agreement leased the Dhahran base to the USAF for three years. It also provided for the American civilian airline TWA to use the airfield for commercial air traffic on the New York-Cairo-Bombay route. It was the first American military facility in the Arabian Peninsula, previously the exclusive preserve of the British Empire.²⁶

FDR's genius was to see the future. In the midst of a global war, the president looked to the future and recognized Saudi Arabia's huge potential importance not only for oil but for what we now call soft power in the Islamic world. Roosevelt sought to harness that importance to America, detaching it from Britain, as America prepared to be the guardian of the postwar peace. It is unlikely any other American in 1945 was as far-sighted as FDR.

The meeting on the *Quincy* also illustrated what has become the fundamental paradox in the relationship. Aside from commerce Saudi Arabia and the United States have few values in common. The Kingdom is an absolute monarchy named after the ruling family; the United States is a vibrant democracy. Saudi Arabia is one of the most intolerant countries in the world regarding religious freedom; the United States prizes freedom of religion. Saudis cannot criticize the king or the ruling family; Americans exercise their freedom of speech. Absent a bedrock of shared values, the alliance has always been defined primarily by shared threats and enemies. Even the first summit was dominated by argument over Palestine's future. It has always been an uneasy partnership.

The Kingdom's Origin

The beginnings of what was to become today's Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be traced to 1744. The heart of the kingdom's leadership is an alliance of two families. One is the al Saud family, which has provided political leadership in an absolute monarchy since 1744. The second is the al Shaykh family, which has provided religious leadership and spiritual guidance for the kingdom since 1744, when the two families sealed an agreement to work together as partners

in building a state in the Arabian Peninsula. This partnership between a governing royal family and a family with its own special claim to a set of theological beliefs is the crucial glue in the political and religious chemistry that makes Saudi Arabia.

Two men created Saudi Arabia. Muhammad ibn Saud, the founder of the dynasty of the House of Saud, was, in the mid-eighteenth century, the amir of Diriyya, a town in the Nejd, the center of the Arabian Peninsula. The Nejd was a barren backwater of the Islamic world, so poor that no outsider wanted to waste the resources to govern it. It was divided among a number of local leaders. Muhammad ibn Saud was one of many local potentates.²⁷

But Muhammad ibn Saud would prove to be more than just another Arabian potentate. Between 1744 and his death in 1765 he gradually expanded Saudi control beyond the agricultural town of Diriyya to most of the Nejd, including the town of Riyadh, today the Kingdom's capital. He is now remembered as the founder of the first Saudi kingdom, and the Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh is named in his honor.

Central to Muhammad ibn Saud's success in conquering the Nejd was his alliance with the second key figure, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al Wahhab. Wahhab is one of the most controversial figures in the history of Islam. To devout Saudis he is the man who restored Islam to its origins, a preacher who taught the right path for believers. The current king, Salman, has created a center for the study of Wahhab's life and preachings on the site of the original Saudi capital, Diriyya; Salman's personal palace is nearby. The center has museums depicting life in the first Saudi state, a library of books by Wahhab and his descendants, and a Memorial Hall illustrating his contribution to Islam. At the center of the complex is a reconstruction of the first house of worship Wahhab built.²⁸ King Salman's son Sultan, Saudi Arabia's only astronaut, has been the driving force behind the reconstruction of Diriyya at his father's behest.²⁹ Qatar, also a Wahhabi state, named its state mosque after him, the Muhammad ibn 'Abd al Wahhab mosque in Doha.

To his many enemies, Wahhab is the archvillain of intolerance and the spiritual father of al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Efforts have been made to paint him as a tool of British imperialism, with one conspiracy theory alleging that he was recruited by a British spy in Basra to encourage conflict between Muslims.³⁰ Even the name of his movement is controversial. Wahhabis generally

do not like to be called Wahhabis because it elevates Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab to the rank of a prophet or a holy figure, an elevation that borders on the idolatry that Wahhab preached against his entire life. They prefer to be called Unitarians or *muwahiddun*, or just Muslims.

Because of his central role in the creation of Saudi Arabia and its ideology, it is crucial to study Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab in some depth. More than any other figure, Wahhab set the ideological base for what Saudi Arabia stands for. He lived in a backwater of Arabia on the edge the Ottoman Empire, and his life story has many gaps and uncertainties. His enemies vilified him effectively. Only recently has Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab been the subject of a detailed biography by a British scholar, who drew on original sources to paint a portrait of one of the most revolutionary and radical figures in the history of Islam.

Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab was born in the Nejd in 1703, the son of a local preacher and judge. He traveled to Mecca and Medina to perform the holy pilgrimage and to study. His first mentor was an Indian scholar, Muhammad Hayat al Sindhi, who emphasized a return to the original sources of Islam, the Quran, and the early accounts of the prophet’s life. In the middle 1730s Ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab traveled to Basra, a major city in southern Iraq. Basra was much more cosmopolitan than any city in Arabia and was home to a large Shia population, as well as many Persians. Christians and Jews lived in Basra as well as traders and merchants from India. Representatives of the English and Dutch East India Companies were engaged in global trading deals there. The city was under the nominal control of the Ottoman Empire but was often threatened by the Safavid Empire in neighboring Iran.

Basra had an important impact on Wahhab’s thinking and development. He may have begun writing his first book during his time in Basra. He certainly began preaching against the diversity of Islamic practice while in the city. Ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab denounced the worship of Ali, the nephew of Muhammad, who is the central figure in Shia Islam. He also denounced the practice of worshipping local Muslim saints and clerics; he spoke against mystical Sufism and the veneration of the tombs of respected Muslim clerics. He was expelled from the city at some point in the 1730s and moved to what is now the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, also known as al Ahsa or al Hasa. This region along the Persian Gulf has a significant Shia presence and, like Basra, appar-

ently played an important part in Wahhab's hostility to Shi'ism. He was expelled from al Hasa for his views and returned to the Nejd.

He did not travel outside that region for the rest of his life.³¹ Some biographies claim Wahhab traveled much further, perhaps to Damascus, Baghdad, and even into Persia. The best recent scholarship, by Michael Crawford, a British scholar whose biography is the most credible to date, dismisses these reports as inaccurate and invented by Wahhab's detractors.³²

In the Nejd, Wahhab aligned himself at first with the ruler of his own native town. Again he spoke out against what he called polytheists who venerated local tombs and even trees. He destroyed these false idols with help from his followers. He said that Arabia had fallen out of grace since the death of the prophet and had returned to the state of ignorance that had preceded Muhammad's prophecy in the seventh century. He ordered stoned to death a woman who publicly announced her adultery. He was expelled from the community and left for Diriyya, where he came under the protection of Abdul Aziz.

The eldest son of Muhammad al Saud, Abdul Aziz had already become a follower of Ibn 'Abd al Wahhab, as were several of his brothers and probably his favorite wife. Taking in the radical preacher was a dangerous move because it put the small Saudi community at war with its neighbors and the Ottoman Empire itself. For the rest of Muhammad al Saud's life he was engaged in battles to defend Diriyya and, ultimately, expand his realm to seize Riyadh and the rest of the Nejd. After his father's death, Abdul Aziz continued the process of expanding the borders of what is now called the first Saudi kingdom.

Muhammad ibn 'Abd al Wahhab's most important book is *Kitab al Tawhid*, and it deals with the central message of his preaching. Wahhab taught that the oneness of God, *tawhid*, is the most important essence of Islam. By this he meant two things. First, God is the sole creator, provider, giver of life and death, and orderer of affairs in the universe. Second, God alone should be the addressee of prayers, supplications, sacrifices, and all other forms of worship. There should be no intermediary between a believer and God, no intercessor to appeal to for help with prayer or devotion. The Prophet Muhammad, as important as he is to Islam, should not be worshipped. Those who pray to Ali (Shia) or Jesus (Christians) or some local, venerated Muslim cleric or saint are infidels even if they claim to be Muslims.

From his perspective almost all Muslims in the world were, thus, infidels or at least polytheists and idol worshippers. The illiterate nomads of Arabia, the Bedouin, were especially ignorant in Wahhab's view because they knew nothing about their beliefs other than what their local cleric told them and often venerated trees or sacred tombs. The Shia were especially ignorant, with their elaborate ceremonies celebrating the struggles of Ali and his son Husayn, their veneration of senior clerics called ayatollahs, and their failure to understand the importance of *tawhid*. Wahhab's own experiences in Basra and al Hasa had bred a deep antagonism toward all Shia. When the first Saudi state conquered al Hasa after his death, the Saudis tried to convert the Shia population to the new Wahhabi viewpoint or at least destroy any vestige of Shi'ism in the mosques and public space.

Given the centrality of *tawhid* in the narrative of Ibn 'Abd al Wahhab it was inevitable that a second major element of his thinking concerned the nature of the Wahhabi community. It must be a community apart, separated from the ignorant. It was essential that infidels not be allowed to travel in the community because they would corrupt it. Equally important, the believers should not travel among the ignorant, again because they might be corrupted. Thus the early version of Wahhabi Islam was very xenophobic and aloof from the outside world. It guarded its righteousness by staying apart from the unbelievers. The believers must be isolated from the infidels.³³

A final key principle was the importance of jihad or holy warfare to expand the community of the faithful. It was incumbent on every believer, and especially those in positions of leadership, to expand the boundaries of the believers and defeat the ignorant. As a result, "the obligation to wage jihad was absolute" for the community and the Saudi leadership especially.³⁴ War between the Saudis and the Ottomans was virtually inevitable.

After the conquest of Riyadh, Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al Wahhab largely retired from everyday public life and devoted himself to writing and preaching. He wrote an extended biography of the Prophet Muhammad and several other books about the teachings of other key Islamic figures. He died in June 1792 at the age of eighty-five. He left six sons who would continue his work and founded the al Shaykh family dynasty that is the al Saud family's most crucial partner.

Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab did not try to develop a concept of an Islamic political order or of a state. Such concepts were simply unknown in the Nejd in the eighteenth century. He was content to leave governance to the Saudi family. He did not call for the creation of an Islamic caliphate or an empire uniting all Muslims. Wahhab’s vision was rather simple: the power of *tawhid* was the basis for understanding everything else. The contradictions between a simple and radical worldview and the realities of governance and diplomacy were challenges for Wahhab’s successors, not for the first Saudi state. The first Saudi state made no compromises with the ignorant and waged war relentlessly against them.

In the last decade of the eighteenth century the first Saudi state grew to become much larger than the current Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At its peak in 1808 it included all the territory that is today Saudi Arabia except for the port of Jidda, which remained an outpost of the Ottoman Empire. It also included what is today Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and parts of northern Oman. The Hadramawt region in south Yemen was a Saudi vassal. Only two parts of the peninsula with unique Islamic sects of their own, Zaydi Shia Yemen and Ibadi Oman, held out against the Saudi state. Mecca and Medina were under Saudi control, an enormous humiliation to the Ottomans who regarded themselves as the true defenders of Islam and the holy cities. In the north, Saudi armies raided Iraq, capturing the wealthy Shia holy city of Kerbala and destroying the tomb of Husayn. They also laid siege to Najaf and Basra in Iraq and Sana’a in Yemen. For a brief moment it appeared the Saudis would dominate the entire Arabian Peninsula. At its peak, the first Saudi state ruled some 2.4 million people.³⁵

The Ottoman Empire, meanwhile, had been under attack from Napoleon and France. The French had invaded Egypt in 1798 and marched into Palestine. The French threat was not fully defeated until late in 1801, and even then the Ottomans were preoccupied with the Napoleonic wars in Europe for several more years. The Ottomans, in 1811, dispatched an army from Egypt, which regained control of Mecca and the Hijaz. In 1818 they marched into the Nejd and captured Diriyya. The senior members of the Saud family that survived the siege and capture of their capital were imprisoned and sent to Cairo. King ‘Abd Allah al Saud was sent on to Istanbul where he was executed. After

storming out of the Nejd and creating a state, the House of Saud's fortunes had collapsed and the family was all but destroyed.³⁶

The Second Saudi Kingdom

The Turkish-Egyptian army that destroyed the first Saudi state did not stay long in Arabia. Political challenges at home required the use elsewhere of the resources that had conquered Arabia. In the 1820s the Ottomans withdrew the bulk of their forces from the Nejd. One of the surviving members of the House of Saud, Turki ibn Abdallah, began to rebuild the Saudi empire. Turki recovered Riyadh from the Turks in 1824. He was assassinated by a cousin in 1834, and his son Faisal bin Turki al Saud succeeded him. The current Saudi leadership are direct descendants of Faisal.

Faisal was forced into exile in 1838 by another Ottoman army, only to return in 1843 to resume Saudi rule of Riyadh and the Nejd. He was successful in bringing the bulk of central Arabia back under Saudi and Wahhabi rule. His forces retook control of the Eastern Province, or al Hasa, from the Turks. Most of what is today the United Arab Emirates and all of Qatar also fell under the control of the second Saudi state. In 1861 Faisal threatened to seize Bahrain, as well, but the British Royal Navy intervened to protect the island from Saudi conquest. The British raj in India felt keeping Bahrain out of the orbit of the Saudis was in the interest of the empire.

Otherwise Faisal was careful not to provoke the British. Unlike the first Saudi state, the second did not try to reach beyond the Arabian Peninsula into Iraq or to fight the Ottomans for the Hejaz and the British in the Gulf states. The Saudis had learned there were some limits to their power and that accommodation with the dominant powers of the day was a necessary constraint enabling their survival. The British gradually consolidated their influence all along the southern shore of the Persian Gulf from Kuwait to Oman, leaving only al Hasa out of their orbit.

Faisal died in December 1865. Infighting among his four sons was the hallmark of the next thirty years of the second Saudi state. Each claimed the right to the throne, and some were prepared to make tactical alliances with the Turks to defeat their brothers. Power and control of Riyadh passed from

one to another. In 1871 the Turks recovered control of al Hasa, and in 1887 the Saudis were driven out of Riyadh. By 1893 the House of Saud was in exile in Kuwait where the amir gave them sanctuary.

Between 1744 and 1893 there were fourteen successions in the House of Saud, as power passed from one king to another. The first two, from Muhammad bin Saud to his son Abdul Aziz and then to his son Saud, were smooth and uncontested. The three kings ruled from 1744 to 1814, and they oversaw the great growth of the first Saudi Kingdom. The next twelve successions witnessed eleven power struggles within the family as power was transferred from one monarch to another. Of fourteen successions in the first two Saudi states, eleven were contested. The founders avoided succession struggles; the generations that followed were consumed with them.³⁷

The long history of the first and second Saudi states is largely unknown in America. The intricacies of their rise and fall has not been taught by many American scholars, even to students of the region. For Saudis, of course, the history of their kingdom is very much a part of their national identity, and the narrative of the rise, fall, rise, fall, and rise again of their state is central to their worldview. Saudis look back on their past, as all nations do, and see lessons learned—or in some cases, lessons learned but later forgotten or set aside.

If Saudis today study the first Saudi state for inspiration about their faith and their roots in the eighteenth century, the second state is a lesson in the dangers of family disharmony. Surrounded by powerful enemies like the Ottomans and the British, the family prospered when its enemies were distracted and the family was united. When the regional powers were able to deploy forces into Arabia and the family was split, the House of Saud was on the defensive if not defeated. The nineteenth century was a time of peril for the family and their Wahhabi ally because the royal family was divided and let the door open to foreign conspiracy against them. In the twentieth century the Saudis would not repeat this mistake.

Ibn Saud and the Third Saudi State

Abd al Aziz ibn Saud was born in Riyadh in 1880. The city was anarchic during much of his childhood as the various factions of the al Saud family competed

for power. As one biography notes, “The young Abd al Aziz was aware of an all pervading atmosphere of insecurity and sense of impermanence during his early years.”³⁸ It was a searing experience that guided him through the rest of his life.

In 1891 under pressure from the Turks and their Arab allies, his father Abd al Rahman al Saud took the family out of Riyadh and into exile. At first they tried to survive in the harsh desert of the Rub al Khali, a huge expanse in what is now southern Saudi Arabia. In 1894 they moved to Kuwait. The local amir in Kuwait was constantly trying to balance the strength of his more powerful neighbors, and giving the Saudis protection in the mid-1890s was temporarily in the interest of the Ottomans who claimed Kuwait as their territory and did not want the rivals of the al Sauds to get too powerful in Arabia.

Kuwait was a much more cosmopolitan place than Riyadh, with merchants from around the world trading and dealing in the port. Ibn Saud was tutored by the members of the al Shaykh family who accompanied the Saudi exiles. The young Ibn Saud was exposed to a world much more complex than that of the Nejd, and he befriended up-and-coming members of the Kuwaiti royal family. The port of Kuwait was also a sought-after prize in the competition between the rival European empires of the late nineteenth century, including Germany and Britain. The British won the battle, and Ibn Saud maneuvered deftly between factions in the Kuwaiti ruling family and backed the group aligned with the British.

With the support of Kuwait, Ibn Saud decided to return to Riyadh and re-establish Saudi control of the Nejd. With a handful of supporters he captured the central fort in the town on January 15, 1902. Ibn Saud’s elderly father Abd al Rahman came back from Kuwait and presented his son with a sword that had belonged to Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab and had been handed down from one Saudi leader to the next for generations. Abd al Rahman would nominally serve as the ceremonial leader of the new Saudi state until his death in 1928, but in practice Ibn Saud ran the kingdom. He fought in over fifty battles between 1902 and 1932.

In the dozen years after taking Riyadh, Ibn Saud gradually restored Saudi authority over the Nejd. He also began a dialogue with the British consul in Kuwait, Captain William Henry Irvine Shakespear, a fluent Arabist and adventurer who reported to the British viceroy in India who had responsibility

for Persian Gulf affairs in the empire. Shakespear took the first photographs of Ibn Saud, and the two forged a strong friendship. Ibn Saud was interested in a dialogue with the British to deter the Turks and his other enemies. In this he was breaking with the Saudi and Wahhabi tradition of seeing all foreigners as infidels who could not be dealt with. It was dramatic evidence that the third Saudi state was going to be a more pragmatic and realistic state than its two predecessors.

In 1913 the Saudis invaded and occupied al Hasa, which had been an Ottoman province. Preoccupied with wars in the Balkans and Libya, the Turks had no resources to defend a faraway desert province. The local Shia community was suppressed, although Ibn Saud granted some local notables in the main Shia towns of Qatif and al Hasa a measure of local rule. Saudi discrimination against the Shia minority (perhaps as many as 10 to 15 percent of Saudis today) is deeply entrenched in the Wahhabi faith. No Shia has ever been a minister in the Kingdom, and only once has a Shia been a Saudi ambassador (to Iran in 1999–2003). The region was renamed the Eastern Province.³⁹

With the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, Ibn Saud's fledgling state found itself in the middle of a global power struggle. When the Ottomans joined the war on the side of the Germans, the allies began planning to carve up the Turkish Empire between them. The British were eager to get the Saudis on their side. Shakespear offered Ibn Saud a treaty guaranteeing Saudi independence under the protection of the viceroy of India and the British Empire. In return Ibn Saud would not support Ottoman calls for a Muslim jihad against the allies. Saud agreed to the proposed treaty, which was dispatched to India and London for review.

Before an answer was returned, Shakespear was killed in a battle between the Saudis and a rival pro-Turkish tribe, the Rashids, in January 1915. His death removed the urgency behind British dealings with Ibn Saud. The Saudi file receded into the background for the British, and they, instead, found a different Arab ally in the sharif of Mecca and his Hashemite family that ruled the Hejaz, the area of current-day Saudi Arabia bordering the Red Sea. The British did, ultimately, sign a treaty with Ibn Saud in 1916 and provided him with some rifles and a small monthly stipend to pay his supporters, but the main focus of British policy in Arabia shifted from the Saudis to the Hashemites.

Ibn Saud stayed on the British side in the war and greatly expanded his territory at the expense of the pro-Turkish Rashid tribe. When the war ended, the Saudis and Hashemites fought their own war to determine control of Arabia. Ibn Saud relied on his tribal army's shock troops, called the *Ikhwan*, or brothers. These were extreme supporters of Wahhabism who were dedicated to expanding the borders of the Saudi-Wahhabi state, much like the early Muslims had in the golden age of Islam or the Wahhabi armies of the first Saudi state in the eighteenth century. They were settled in oases and practiced a stern and extreme puritanism.

In 1925 Ibn Saud's Ikhwan army took Mecca and Medina. The Hashemites were expelled from the Hejaz, although thanks to their British connection they remained in Jordan and Iraq. In Mecca and Medina the Saudis purged the holy cities of what they considered idols. Mosques or other structures built to remember members of Muhammad's family or those of his key supporters were destroyed. In particular, the Jannat al Baqi cemetery in Medina—the burial site adjacent to the prophet's mosque for many of his family members, close companions, and other central figures of early Islam—was leveled, destroying many sites revered especially by Shia. The site also had been destroyed by the first Saudi state and then restored by the Ottomans. The destruction of the Baqi cemetery remains an outstanding source of friction between the Saudis and Shia today.

In January 1926 Ibn Saud was proclaimed king of the Nejd and Hejaz. The British negotiated a new treaty with Ibn Saud a year later, recognizing him as an independent king and accepting his conquest of the Hejaz. In return Ibn Saud accepted British control of the Gulf emirates and their position in Jordan and Iraq. He also accepted the transfer of part of the northern Hejaz to Jordan, especially the cities of Aqaba and Ma'an, which had historically been ruled as part of the Hejaz. In addition, Ibn Saud ceded claims to the narrow eastern wing of Jordan that connects it to Iraq.⁴⁰ Relations with the Hashemite monarchs in Amman and Baghdad remained strained well into the 1950s.

The Ikhwan were dissatisfied with Ibn Saud's decision to accept British primacy in the region and to halt the expansion of the Saudi state further to the north and east. After a bloody two-year-long rebellion, they were crushed

as a military force. The British Royal Air Force helped Ibn Saud defeat the Ikhwan by bombing its raiding parties whenever they moved close to Jordan or Kuwait. The Wahhabi clerical establishment stayed loyal to the Saudi monarchy, and in return its hegemony over domestic and social issues was confirmed.⁴¹

While the Ikhwan was crushed, another institution of the Wahhabi establishment flourished. These were the religious police, or *mutawween*. These were official enforcers of the religious rules and rituals of Wahhabi Islam. No one was beyond their authority. Most mutawween were Nejdīs even in the Hejaz and al Hasa, where they were brought in to enforce discipline. Later they were given the official title of the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prohibition of Vice.⁴²

The Saudis fought another war in 1934 with the only other independent state in the Arab world, Yemen. After the nominal Ottoman control of Yemen ended in 1918, the Zaydi Shia monarchy proclaimed the country's independence. The Wahhabi and Zaydi monarchies were uncomfortable neighbors. In the war Ibn Saud's forces defeated the Yemenis and then took several border regions in the resulting peace agreement, expanding the Saudi state to the southwest. Many Yemenis have never accepted the outcome of the 1934 war as legitimate.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was formally proclaimed in 1932. The conquest of the Hejaz had made Ibn Saud the defender of the holy cities and provided a modest income from fees paid by pilgrims coming to the holy cities, especially during the annual Hajj. But the Great Depression of the 1930s sharply reduced the number of pilgrims each year with a resulting significant decline in the Kingdom's income. In the boom years of the 1920s, about 100,000 pilgrims came each year for the Hajj; by 1940 the number had dropped to only 37,000.⁴³

Ibn Saud was increasingly desperate for another source of income. Oil had been discovered decades earlier in Iran, Bahrain, and Iraq, and the global oil companies were eager to explore the Kingdom, especially al Hasa, now known as the Eastern Province. The king in 1933 turned to an American oil company, Standard Oil Company of California, and signed a deal for exploration. This signing took place in his new palace in Riyadh, which had just been

built for him by a young emigrant from the Hadramawt in Yemen, Muhammad bin Laden.⁴⁴

The Americans found oil in 1938. Ibn Saud had chosen Standard Oil in large part because it was American and he did not want a British or other European oil company exploring the Kingdom for fear it would lead to the British or French trying to gain political control of the Kingdom. The Saudi fear of British imperialism was deeply rooted. Ibn Saud and others knew they needed to accommodate London, but they had no faith that Britain had abandoned plans for the further expansion of the empire, especially if there was oil to be gained.

In the Second World War Ibn Saud was officially neutral but, in fact, tilted toward the Allied cause. Surrounded by the British Empire, he had little choice. Italy inadvertently bombed Dhahran in October 1940; the intended target had been British bases in nearby Bahrain.⁴⁵ The Germans tried to tempt Faisal to join their side. In early 1941 a pro-German coup took place in Iraq; the Germans suggested Ibn Saud support the coup but he refrained. In April 1941 Adolf Hitler sent Ibn Saud a personal, private message suggesting that if Saudi Arabia joined the Axis powers against Britain, Berlin would recognize Ibn Saud as “King of all the Arabs.” The message was sent via the Saudi ambassador in Switzerland. Ibn Saud not only rejected Hitler’s offer, he recalled the ambassador in Bern for dealing with the Nazis.⁴⁶ As we have seen, near the end of the war Saudi Arabia officially declared war on both Germany and Japan.

In the postwar era Saudi oil income and wealth gradually expanded, but for the majority of the residents the Kingdom remained a desperately impoverished backwater through the remainder of Ibn Saud’s life. He did consolidate power in his own hands. He had demonstrated a pragmatic foreign policy much more sophisticated than his predecessors in the first two Saudi states, making treaties with the British and welcoming American oil prospectors. Ibn Saud had total power over life and death in his kingdom. His alliance with the United States sealed on the USS *Quincy* on Valentine’s Day 1945 further strengthened his posture as the undisputed master of Arabia. On his death on November 9, 1953, Ibn Saud’s legacy was firm: the third Saudi state was an absolute monarchy rooted in its commitment to practicing Wahhabi Islam.

The American "Betrayal" of Ibn Saud

The last years of Ibn Saud's life were as tumultuous as the earlier years. After 1945 the British, French, and Italian empires in the Middle East were in retreat. Arab states like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq gradually got their independence. The Zionist movement triumphed in Palestine and created the state of Israel, with important support from Roosevelt's successor, Harry S. Truman. For Ibn Saud and his family the latter was a betrayal of the promise the king thought he had secured aboard the USS *Quincy*. This Saudi sense of betrayal would have a longstanding and bitter residue in U.S.-Saudi relations.

As noted earlier in this chapter, President Roosevelt sent the king a letter after the summit in Egypt in response to a message from the king dated March 10, 1945. FDR's April 5, 1945, letter was addressed to GREAT AND GOODFRIEND. It stated: "Your majesty will recall that on previous occasions I communicated to you the attitude of the American government towards Palestine and made clear our determination that no decision be taken with respect to the basic situation in that country without full consultation with both Arabs and Jews . . . and 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." The letter concluded with FDR reassuring Ibn Saud that those commitments were "unchanged."⁴⁷

Great Britain, exhausted by the cost of the world war, turned Palestine's future over to the United Nations to decide. A UN special commission recommended in 1947 that the country be partitioned between the Jews and the Arabs. The Arabs rejected the recommendation and requested, instead, full independence for a unified Palestine, which would elect its own government. Since Arabs were still a majority in the area, that would have been an Arab government.

President Truman, for a variety of reasons, including domestic politics but also a keen sense of responsibility to assist the survivors of Hitler's Holocaust, chose to support the UN recommendation. In 1947 the United States lobbied the UN Security Council to endorse the partition plan. Both the State Department and the military pressed Truman not to support partition, because they feared it would provoke an Arab, especially Saudi, backlash. But Truman's White House advisers told him, accurately, that the Saudis needed the American

oil companies and their oil income too much to afford to take any action against Washington. Clark Clifford, Truman's legal counsel, argued, "The fact of the matter is the Arab states must have oil royalties or go broke. Military necessity, political and economic self preservation will compel the Arabs to sell their oil to the United States. Their need of the United States is greater than our need of them."⁴⁸

The Saudis were deeply angered by Truman's decision, which they saw, right or wrong, as a repudiation of the FDR commitment to take no action harmful to the Arabs. The Roosevelt letter was not a personal communication, as the language in it makes clear it was an official commitment of the presidency and the government. Prince Faisal, who had been the architect of the American-Saudi alliance in 1943, now urged his father to cut diplomatic relations with the United States. Ibn Saud did not, largely because he needed the income from the American oil company in the Eastern Province. Instead, Ibn Saud instructed all provincial governors to raise volunteers to fight in Palestine alongside the other Arab armies. At least a thousand joined the war in 1947–48, the first instance of Saudi volunteers going abroad to fight for a Muslim cause.⁴⁹

The American role in the creation of Israel left a bitter residue in the minds of many influential Saudis, especially Faisal. For Faisal and others in the royal family, Truman had betrayed Roosevelt's commitments and the Kingdom was too dependent on America to do anything about it. This would prove to have lasting implications.