

OIL AND ISLAM:  
THE CENTRAL ROLE OF SAUDI ARABIA IN THE  
EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATION'S MIDDLE EAST POLICIES 1954-1958

By

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Senior Thesis

Submitted to the Department of History

University of California, Santa Barbara

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

History of Public Policy

June 2019

## Introduction

On January 29, 1957, King Saud of Saudi Arabia emerged from his airplane into the wintry air of Washington DC. President Dwight D. Eisenhower greeted him on the tarmac. Just a few weeks earlier, on January 5, Eisenhower had announced before Congress his new plan for containing the expansion of Soviet influence in the Middle East. The Eisenhower Doctrine, as the policy came to be called, reflected the fact that pursuing and protecting US interests in the Middle East had become an official foreign policy priority for the first time. Central to the administration's Middle East policies, reflected by the January visit, were Saudi Arabia and King Saud.

Saudi Arabia's importance lay not only in its oil reserves, the main American interest in the kingdom, but also in its relationship to Islam, which Eisenhower saw as a potential ideological counterforce to communism. The administration sought to protect Saudi Arabia and surrounding oil-transit states such as Iraq and Syria from communist influence that might disrupt American access to oil. It also aimed to use the perceived religious credentials of the kingdom and its leader as tools in the conduct of US foreign policy in the region. In other words, the Kingdom was central to the Eisenhower administration's policies towards the Middle East not only because of the administration's desire to protect its access to oil but also because of the Kingdom's potential utility in the pursuit of another key American interest: containing the regional spread of Soviet influence.

The administration's desire to protect its access to oil is understandable. While America's domestic demand for oil was mainly covered by its domestic production as well as oil from Latin America, Middle eastern oil was crucial for the post-World War II reconstruction efforts of American allies like Europe and Japan. Their ability to rebuild and regain both geopolitical

power and the ability to buy American goods hinged on the continued flow of the oil that was powering their rebuilding process. Thus Eisenhower's drive to protect that flow makes sense. However, understanding the administration's strategy of utilizing the Saudi kingdom and Islam as foreign policy tools, and especially understanding why the administration thought it would succeed, requires a brief discussion of the main theme of this paper: the role of religion and orientalist misperceptions in the Eisenhower administration's formulation and implementation of foreign policy.

### **Part 1, Section 1: Eisenhower, Foreign Policy, and Religion**

Throughout his presidency, Eisenhower searched for "spiritual advantages" to exploit in his formulation and implementation of various policies.<sup>1</sup> For example, the president often employed religious rhetoric when addressing the American public on the Cold War and the threat of communism, and he sought to frame the conflict as a holy war. He attempted to generate public support for his policies by reminding Americans "of the special responsibility to which God had called America" in the fight against communism, and warned of "communism's atheism and hostility to religion."<sup>2</sup> The assumption was that the threat of religious persecution under communism would spur Americans to action against it.

The historian William Inboden argues that it was only by framing the Cold War as a "religious crusade" that the Eisenhower administration could "maintain domestic support for the extraordinary measures needed to fight the Cold War."<sup>3</sup> "If faith in God was as important and

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Morrison, "Faith Fights Communism: The United States and Islam in Saudi Arabia During the Cold War" (Masters diss., University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2009), 65.

<sup>2</sup> William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

powerful as many Americans believed, and if communism sought to control and even extinguish religious belief,” so Eisenhower thought, “then it only followed that religion could serve as a potent tool for strengthening anticommunist resolve at home and undermining communism abroad.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the Eisenhower administration sought to employ religion not only as a Cold War rallying cry at home but also as “an integral weapon in its anticommunism arsenal” abroad.<sup>5</sup>

The historians T. Jeremy Gunn and Mounia Slighoua echo Inboden’s analysis, arguing that the Eisenhower administration used religion as “a quite specific tactical and strategic tool in the formation and implementation of US foreign policy.”<sup>6</sup> The authors show how, in the 1953 overthrow of Mohammed Mosaddeq’s government in Iran, in the 1954 overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz’s government in Guatemala, and in the 1955 election of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam, the Eisenhower administration used religion as a tool in conceiving, implementing, and justifying plans and policies that aimed to influence the outcomes of these events.

For the most part, these plans were carried out by the CIA following approval by the Eisenhower administration, and they often took the form of propaganda campaigns that sought to exploit fears of an atheistic communist takeover. For example, in pursuing the overthrow of the Arbenz government in 1954, the CIA tried to influence Guatemalan public opinion by spreading a false news story that, should Arbenz remain in power, “there will no longer be any religious instruction at state expense, but on the contrary lessons in atheism, Soviet style.”<sup>7</sup> In the case of the South Vietnam, the CIA took a more direct approach.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> T. Jeremy Gunn & Mounia Slighoua, “The Spiritual Factor: Eisenhower, Religion, and Foreign Policy,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 9, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 47.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 45.

Following the 1954 Geneva Conference, which dictated the temporary division of Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, the Vietnamese were given 300 days to move to their preferred side of the border before it closed and elections were held on both sides. To ensure the election of the pro-American, Catholic, staunchly anti-communist Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam, the CIA decided to incentivize the approximately one million Catholic Vietnamese living in the north under the communist rule of Ho Chi Minh to move south.<sup>8</sup> The assumption was that, because Diem was Catholic as well, the northern Catholics would automatically support him. The CIA spread rumors throughout North Vietnam of the impending religious persecution the northern Catholics would face under communism, and then arranged for the US Navy to transfer those northerners who aimed to flee south in what became known as Operation Passage to Freedom. Eventually, around 700,000 northern Catholics evacuated to the south, and Diem was “elected” the first president of South Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

Eisenhower was obviously invested in this idea that instilling fears of religious persecution would rally people to take some action, whatever that may be. Was it that the president, being a deeply religious individual himself, was quite fearful of religious persecution under communism and assumed that others were equally scared? Scholars disagree. Rob Morrison argues that Eisenhower was in fact “deeply spiritual” and that Eisenhower’s “religious values... were instilled during his early childhood.”<sup>10</sup> Gunn and Slighoua counter that Eisenhower, in a meeting with famous preacher Billy Graham, revealed to Graham that “he and his wife had rarely attended church during the war, and that he had long since lapsed from the religious teaching of his youth.”<sup>11</sup> They argue that Eisenhower’s use of religion as a tool “had

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Morrison, “Faith Fights Communism,” 64.

<sup>11</sup> Gunn and Slighoua, “The Spiritual Factor,” 40.

little to do with spirituality and much to do with perceived political advantages.”<sup>12</sup> As the historian Andrew Preston puts it, it is difficult to truly identify and evaluate “the true motivators of a president’s decision – be it religious or otherwise – in the midst of several, often intangible and thus unknowable, political objectives.”<sup>13</sup>

Though Eisenhower may not have been as genuinely spiritual and religious as his rhetoric made him out to be, it is well established that he grew up in a very religious household. His parents were both Jehova’s Witnesses, and Eisenhower claimed that “Everybody I knew went to church.”<sup>14</sup> Such an upbringing undeniably influenced his world view and normative ideas about people, and whether Eisenhower was genuinely spiritual or not, he recognized that some people were so deeply religious, and saw faith as so central to their identities, that they would do just about anything to protect those values should they face the threat of religious persecution, especially at the hands of atheistic communists. The problem was that when it came to Islam and the Middle East, Eisenhower assumed that all Muslims, not just some, were that deeply religious. He applied this misperception, on top of other Orientalist misperceptions, to the Middle East as a whole. This led him to craft flawed policies towards the region.

## **Part 1, Section 2: Eisenhower, Foreign Policy, and Orientalism**

One of Eisenhower’s strategies for containing Soviet influence in the region was to build up King Saud as a pan-Islamic anti-communist regional leader based on the perception that, as “protector” of the Holy cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina, his religious clout would translate to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Preston, “The Deeper Roots of Faith and Foreign Policy,” *International Journal* 65, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 455.

<sup>14</sup> William I. Hitchcock, “How Dwight Eisenhower Found God in the White House,” History.com, last modified August 22, 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/eisenhower-billy-graham-religion-in-god-we-trust>

regional political power as well. The goal of the strategy was to provide the Arab world with an alternative to aligning with President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, the undisputed political leader of the Arab world and champion of Arab nationalism, who the Eisenhower administration felt was too closely aligned with the Soviet Union. On that wintry day in early 1957 when King Saud visited the US, President Eisenhower aimed to show the world that Saud was the real deal. However, no amount of hype, even from the President of the United States, was going to make a regional leader of a man who drove around the desert tossing money out of his car to watch the impoverished locals chase after it.<sup>15</sup>

“Saud was a sad figure,” said US Foreign Service Officer David Newsom. “He always reminded me of King Lear in a way. He was almost blind, heavy set, not very smart.”<sup>16</sup> Historian Rashid Khalidi refers to the King as “profligate.”<sup>17</sup> Historian Salim Yaqub describes Saud as “amiable but inexperienced... largely ignorant of affairs beyond his borders... his personal lifestyle, a gaudy spectacle of opulence and debauchery.”<sup>18</sup> The King often found himself compared to his more competent father King Abd al-Aziz, the founder of the modern Saudi kingdom, as well as to his younger half-brother Faisal. “Whereas King Abdel Aziz was revered and feared,” says Historian Rachel Bronson, “King Saud was wasteful and politically inept.”<sup>19</sup> Parker T. Hart, US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia from 1961 to 1965 said, “Saud was not a well-educated man and didn’t have as good judgement as his half-brother Faisal.”<sup>20</sup> Not only was

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<sup>15</sup> Rachel Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil: America’s Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 75.

<sup>16</sup> ADST Country and Subject Reader Series: Saudi Arabia, *Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Arlington VA*, 116.

<sup>17</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 45.

<sup>19</sup> Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> ADST Country and Subject Reader: Saudi Arabia, 24.

Saud devoid of political leadership potential, but the King was an authoritarian and lacked any sort of public opinion support. For the most part, he was despised throughout the region. It takes no expert to see that the King was not set for regional leadership, so why did Eisenhower choose to pursue such a policy?

The answer lies in the Orientalist misperceptions that President Eisenhower and many other US policymakers held about Saudi Arabia and the Muslim world at the time. Rob Morrison shows how “British Orientalists like Bernard Lewis, Albert Hourani, and Hamilton Gibb introduced stereotypes of Islam as a monolithic cultural phenomenon capable of uniting the Muslim world into a rigid anti-communist bloc.”<sup>21</sup> This specific stereotype about Islam and the Muslim world “migrated to the United States from Europe as the balance of global power shifted across the Atlantic following World War II.”<sup>22</sup> Essentially, these stereotypes transferred from European academic circles into American academic circles, and from there, into policymaking circles.

The fault of the British Orientalists was in essentially reducing and simplifying Islam to a monolithic religion and the Muslim world to a monolithic region of static societies, but also in creating the idea that Islam “defined the day-to-day lives” of Muslims.<sup>23</sup> As Morrison puts it, the ideas that “the most influential aspect of every Muslim’s life was their strict adherence to Islam” and that the Muslim world could be united “by the monolithic tenets of Islam, surpassing in importance political boundaries as well as disparate socio-economic conditions,” were key misperceptions that led the Eisenhower administration to craft flawed strategies and policies

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<sup>21</sup> Morrison, *Faith Fights Communism*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 15-16.

<sup>23</sup> Michael F. Jacobs, “The Perils and Promise of Islam: The United States and the Muslim Middle East in the Early Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 4 (September 2006): 711.



towards the region.<sup>24</sup> These ideas migrated from academia to policymaking circles and subsequently became entrenched in the collective mind of the Eisenhower administration. A 1953 report by the Psychological Strategy Board, a U.S. government planning agency, stated that policymakers must consider the “all pervading influence of the Muslim faith on Arab thinking.”<sup>25</sup>

Important here is the misperception that, because Islam was so important to Muslims, it could be used to unite them even against pervasive social, political, and economic divisions that were present in the region. Eisenhower and other policymakers saw Islam as a panacea that could be applied in the Middle East to heal the divisions that they believed nationalist leaders like Nasser were exploiting to win the favor of the Arab world and pull it closer to the Soviet Union. This is why Eisenhower believed that building up King Saud as a pan-Islamic rival to Nasser was a sound plan. The President believed that Saud’s religious credentials, as King of the country so central to Islam, could translate to political power, and that the Arab world would essentially drop its social, political, and economic divisions and unite under his Islamic leadership because of how strong the role of faith was in their lives. The plan combined the misperceptions that all Muslims were deeply religious and that the Muslim world could be united by faith even against deep political, social, and cultural divisions.

Because of these misperceptions, Saudi Arabia and King Saud became central tools in the Eisenhower Administration’s formation and implementation of US Middle East policies. Eisenhower sought to employ Islam as a bulwark against the regional spread of communism as well as to use King Saud’s endorsement of various Western policies to remove the association with Western imperialism that often provided a road block for American containment actions in

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<sup>24</sup> Morrison, “Faith Fights Communism,” 23 and 32.

<sup>25</sup> Jacobs, “The Perils and Promise of Islam,” 711.

the region. Thus, Saudi Arabia became central to the Eisenhower administration's policies towards the Middle East not only because of the administration's desire to protect its access to oil, but also because of the Kingdom's potential utility in halting the regional spread of communism.

## **Part 2, Section 1: Alpha, Arms, and Allies (Late 1954 to Early 1956)**

President Eisenhower and King Saud both entered their respective positions of power in 1953 and quickly formed a relationship centered on oil. This was nothing new. Since the beginning of the US-Saudi relationship in the 1930s, oil had always been the partnership's cornerstone. However, having been elected to lead the sponsor nation of the global post-World War II rebuild, Eisenhower knew that ensuring the continued flow of oil to key American allies, especially Western Europe and Japan, was more important than ever before. As the historian Nathan Citino puts it, maintaining that flow of oil became "the basic consideration in [Eisenhower's] Middle East foreign policy."<sup>26</sup>

The President was not too worried about King Saud turning his back on the US, at least on his own accord. The Saudi King valued the relationship with the United States too, for he was profiting mightily from oil sales. The King's notoriously opulent lifestyle was dependent on those payments, and he did not plan to change his ways any time soon. What *did* worry the President, especially after a Soviet propaganda leaflet warning of "foreign imperialists" and "American Pigs" was found at a Saudi oil facility in August 1954, were the increasingly frequent

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<sup>26</sup> Nathan Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Saud, and the Making of US-Saudi Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 42.

efforts by the Soviet Union to expand its influence into the Middle East region.<sup>27</sup> If anything was going to disrupt the flow of Saudi oil to American allies, it would be the Soviets.

In late 1954, the Eisenhower administration sought to work with the British to achieve a peace settlement between Israel and the Arab states. U.S. and British officials feared the Soviets would exploit the regional tensions emanating from the conflict to gain influence in the region and potentially disrupt the flow of Saudi oil to American allies. At the center of this strategy was the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. Known as Project Alpha, the plan aimed to push Nasser, as the leader of the most populous and influential Arab country, to move towards reconciliation with Israel in hopes that the rest of the region would follow his lead. However, the plan greatly underestimated the Arab aversion to Israel. Eisenhower never could grasp the salience of the perceived Zionist threat to the Arab world, and as late as 1959 he was still reminding Middle Eastern leaders that communism, not Zionism, posed the most dire threat to the region.<sup>28</sup> As Rob Morrison puts it, the President's "incomprehension of the feelings of Muslim leaders towards Zionism highlighted his misinformed understanding of contemporary Middle Eastern politics."<sup>29</sup>

Though Nasser played along with the Alpha plan for a while, there was no chance that he would move towards reconciliation with Israel. The Soviets were quicker to pick up on this than the US and, around the same time that Project Alpha was conceived, increased their overtures to Nasser. By the end of 1954, historian Peter Hahn writes, the Egyptian leader had "embarked on a new foreign policy... that committed him first to oppose any strong manifestation of Western influence in the Middle East and then to interact with the Soviet Union and other communist

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<sup>27</sup> Morrison, "Faith Fights Communism," 82.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

powers to advance his own interests.”<sup>30</sup> As it later turned out, Nasser was expertly playing the United States and the Soviet Union off against each other, seeking to manipulate the fears of each super power to gain better offers of aid and support. This is a maneuver that Nasser masterfully employed at multiple junctures throughout his rule.

In early 1955, as Nasser gained popularity and became the undisputed political leader of the region, the Arab world began to polarize and split into two factions. In February 1955, Iraq and Turkey formed the Baghdad pact, which later expanded to include Pakistan, Iran, and Britain. The formation of the Pact provided a bit of a stumbling block for the Eisenhower administration’s efforts to navigate its relationships in the region, especially after the British joined the Pact in April. For one, the alliance pushed Nasser further into the Soviet camp. According to William Bowers, the Egyptian leader saw the Baghdad Pact “as an attempt by the West to allure nations, like Iraq, away from their Arab commitments” and believed that it was “a pretext for the West to meddle in the Middle East’s affairs.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Iraq and Egypt had long been engaged in a “rivalry born out of a contest for influence amongst the Arabs” of the region.<sup>32</sup> The Eisenhower administration provided aid and support to the pact while simultaneously trying to distance itself from it as to not be associated with Britain’s imperialistic reputation, as Eisenhower knew that any such closeness to Britain might antagonize King Saud. Nonetheless, in March 1955 Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia formed a rival alliance known as the ESS Pact.

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt, 1945-1956: Strategy and Diplomacy in the Early Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 180.

<sup>31</sup> William J. Bowers, “Saudi Arabia and the United States’ Plan for Middle East Defense” (MA diss., Baylor University, 2006), 86.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

The Eisenhower administration was prone to applying a “Cold War lens” to all international political occurrences rather than examining occurrences as a product of regional, on-the-ground dynamics, and the creation of the ESS Pact was no exception. As a result, Eisenhower wrongly interpreted the ESS Pact to be a pro-Soviet, rather than simply an anti-Iraq, counterpart to the Baghdad Pact. Thus, the fact that King Saud opted into the pact worried the administration. Saudi Arabia’s joining of the pact was a regional political move on King Saud’s part. For one, Arab nationalism was rapidly permeating the region. King Saud himself was no Arab nationalist, but he felt he needed to appease Nasser and the other Arab states by joining the Arab nationalist parade and not appearing to be too close to the Western powers. He was also working to appease the mostly anti-American Saudi Council of Ministers. Furthermore, the US Ambassador to Egypt at the time, Jefferson Caffery, believed that Nasser was playing to King Saud’s ego and “inflating the Saudi King’s view of his own abilities and role as a Near Eastern political leader.”<sup>33</sup> Saud’s joining of the Pact was also motivated by the fact that Iraq, the central power of the Baghdad Pact, was a longtime regional rival of Saudi Arabia, just as it was to Egypt. While Egypt’s rivalry with Iraq was rooted in regional power politics, the Saudis’ rivalry was “based on historical disputes and on Saudi skepticism” that Iraq “had territorial ambitions in Saudi Arabia.”<sup>34</sup> Though the Saudis harshly condemned the Baghdad Pact, they were “quick to remind their US counterparts that they did not view them as enemies.”<sup>35</sup>

Throughout the summer and fall of 1955, Israel and Egypt engaged in a series of military engagements that should have alerted the Eisenhower administration to the fact that Project Alpha was a pipedream. Nonetheless, the administration continued to underestimate Nasser’s

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<sup>33</sup> Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC*, 69-70.

<sup>34</sup> Bowers, “Saudi Arabia and the United States’ Plan for Middle East Defense,” 86.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

nationalist antipathy toward Israel and pursued an Egyptian-led conciliation effort between Israel and the Arab world, even as “the twin grievances of imperialism and Zionism acquired new force in Arab politics.”<sup>36</sup> The Soviets were quicker to grasp this phenomenon than the Americans and attempted to exploit the grievances to turn the region against the United States and towards them. Soon enough, the Eisenhower administration made a drastic miscalculation.

Throughout the summer, Nasser continued to shrewdly play the two Cold War superpowers against each other to procure the best arms deal. In negotiations with the United States, he would use the threat of turning to the Soviet Union for arms instead as leverage, and vice versa in negotiations with the Soviets. The Eisenhower administration eventually offered Nasser a deal it knew he would refuse, and he did. Washington didn’t want the Egyptian leader to have powerful weapons, and it also doubted he would actually turn to the Soviets if he didn’t make a deal with the United States. However, in September 1955, Nasser proved the Eisenhower administration wrong and concluded a \$200-million arms deal with the Soviet Union where Czechoslovakia acted as an intermediary.<sup>37</sup> The Soviet-Egypt arms deal marked not just the final demise of the Alpha Plan but also the first instance of “significant Soviet penetration of the region.”<sup>38</sup> As one Soviet official put it, “Earlier we had no access to the Arab countries... But then we sold arms to Egypt, we bared our teeth to our enemies, and... now they cannot any longer resolve the issues of the Near East without us.”<sup>39</sup>

From late 1954 to late 1955, The Eisenhower Administration severely underestimated the effect that Arab nationalism was having in the Middle East, especially its twin grievances of Zionism and Western imperialism. As long as Saudi oil was flowing to American allies, the

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<sup>36</sup> Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 40.

administration didn't spend too much time actually trying to understand what was occurring on the ground in the region. Though Saudi Arabia's adherence to the ESS Pact spooked the administration a bit, it continued to pursue the doomed Project Alpha, not realizing its miscalculation until the Soviets and Egyptians concluded a massive arms deal that represented not only Egypt's first real move towards a pro-Soviet position, but also the first real expansion of Soviet influence into the region.

Following the arms deal, the Eisenhower administration began to worry about the Saudis' relations with Egypt, and the possibility the Kingdom might even seek a similar deal with the Soviet Union. In late September, Secretary of States Dulles gave the US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia instructions to warn King Saud that "Nasser was leading Egypt into the arms of godless communism" and that, because of his "special position" in the Muslim world, he could not follow suit.<sup>40</sup> Throughout late 1955, the Eisenhower administration decided not to take any further chances on Saudi Arabia moving closer to Egypt, especially in light of Nasser's new relations with the Soviets. On March 8, 1956, Eisenhower noted in his diary that the US should begin directing its efforts "towards separating the Saudi Arabians from the Egyptians" and making sure that the Saudis realized "their best interests lie with us, and not with the Egyptians and with the Russians."<sup>41</sup> By the end of that same month, the plan to separate Saud and Nasser would play a central role in the administration's new strategy which came to be called the Omega Plan.

## **Section 2, Part 2: The Omega Plan and the United States Information Agency (Early 1956)**

On March 28, 1956, the Omega Plan was born in the form of a memo delivered to Eisenhower from the State Department. The memo assessed the current outlook in the Middle

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<sup>40</sup> Morrison, "Faith Fights Communism, 70.

<sup>41</sup> Scott Lucas, *Britain and Suez: The Lion's Last Roar* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 28.

East. It reiterated how the administration had spent that last few years looking to Nasser to take regional leadership and solve the problems of the Middle East in such a way that aligned with American interests. Nasser had in fact assumed regional leadership, but he was not going to play the role of America's pawn. Thus, there was "little likelihood the Western powers will be able to work with Nasser in the foreseeable future."<sup>42</sup> The main idea of the strategy was to isolate Nasser within the region, forcing him to eventually turn towards the West. If enough states in the Middle East turned towards the US, the thinking went, Nasser would have to follow suit. Thus, the Eisenhower administration, in an effort to shake up relations between the US and Egypt, planned to reduce cooperation with Egypt and enhance cooperation with other states in the region by offering aid and other forms of support. However, the key was to "leave Nasser a bridge back to good relations with the West if he so desires."<sup>43</sup> Washington did not want to break with him completely.

The memo presented a number of potential plans of action for pursuing Nasser's isolation such as countering the increasing level of anti-Western propaganda, pressing the United Nations to take actions to reduce regional tensions, and working to minimize Egyptian influence in places like Sudan, Libya, and Jordan. Moreover, the memo mentioned undertaking a "sustained effort to detach Saudi Arabia from Egyptian influence," but this was not necessarily the central proposal of the document.<sup>44</sup> The memo was more so a list of options for Eisenhower to read over and approve, which he did later that day in a meeting with other officials. It was then that Saudi Arabia became of central importance to the plan to isolate Nasser.

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<sup>42</sup> Department of the State. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume XV: Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1 – July 26, 1956. No. 222.

<sup>43</sup> Department of the State. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume XV: Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1 – July 26, 1956. No. 223.

<sup>44</sup> Department of the State. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume XV: Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1 – July 26, 1956. No. 222.



After going through the memo, President Eisenhower approved the full plan but specifically emphasized “the importance of focusing our attention upon Saudi Arabia in order to develop a position of greater strength in that country.”<sup>45</sup> Officials believed they could exploit the “natural tension between revolutionary Egypt and the oil-rich Saudi monarchy” and lure Saudi back to its side by assuring him “that some of his military needs will immediately be met and others provided for subsequently.”<sup>46</sup> Along with a strengthened US position in the Gulf state, the President wanted “to encourage the King to assume greater leadership in the Arab world” and, in doing so, act as a counterforce to Nasser’s steadily growing influence over the region and its general direction.<sup>47</sup>

A diary entry that Eisenhower wrote later that same evening provided some further details about the role he envisioned for King Saud in the administration’s containment plan. The President reiterated his frustration with Nasser’s reluctance to cooperate with any Arab-Israeli conciliation efforts which he saw as a side effect of the Egyptian President’s “sense of power he has gained out of his association with the Soviets.”<sup>48</sup> Because of Nasser’s ambitious attitude, Eisenhower “suggested to the State Department that we begin to build up some other individual as a prospective leader of the Arab world” in an effort to “disrupt the aggressive plans Nasser is evidently developing.”<sup>49</sup> Of course, any perceived aggression on the part of Nasser, after being filtered through the Cold War lens, refocused into aggression on the part of the Soviet Union. To contain such aggression, Eisenhower suggested that King Saud be built up as a rival to Nasser.

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<sup>45</sup> Department of the State. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume XV: Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1 – July 26, 1956. No. 224.

<sup>46</sup> Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC*, 95; Department of the State. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume XV: Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1 – July 26, 1956. No. 223.

<sup>47</sup> Department of the State. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume XV: Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1 – July 26, 1956. No. 224.

<sup>48</sup> Department of the State. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume XV: Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1 – July 26, 1956. No. 226.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

More specifically, Eisenhower suggested that because “Arabia is a country that contains the holy places of the Moslem world, and the Saudi Arabians are considered to be the most deeply religious of all the Arab groups... the King could be built up, possibly, as a spiritual leader. Once this were accomplished we might begin to urge his right to political leadership.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, Eisenhower believed that Saud could be portrayed as a powerful politico-religious leader and unite the region from that position of authority, because, of course, all Muslims would flock to any seemingly powerful religious figure no matter their different political, cultural, and social leanings. The President’s various misperceptions about Islam and the role it played in the everyday Muslims’ lives led him to believe that King Saud “commands the respect of more than 200 million Muslims throughout the world.”<sup>51</sup> Eisenhower wanted to channel that supposedly far-reaching respect into regional political power.

This idea did not come out of nowhere. As I mentioned in the first section of the paper, Eisenhower had sought to exploit perceived spiritual advantages in previous foreign policy initiatives. For the most part, these efforts were successful, at least along the lines of accomplishing what the government had set out to do. So why not act similarly in this new Middle Eastern episode? Nor was Eisenhower the first U.S. official to consider building up a regional Islamic leader as a means of containment. Nathan Citino finds that, in the early 1950s, the CIA agent “Kermit Roosevelt and his staff had sought ‘a Moslem Billy Graham’ to mobilize religious fervor... against communism.”<sup>52</sup> It was also in the early 1950s that the administration created a propaganda organization that employed religion in the form of a widespread propaganda campaign throughout the region.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, 74.

<sup>52</sup> Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC*, 98-99.

Since the earliest days of the Cold War, the US government had sought to influence the Arab world's opinion of not only the Soviet Union but also the United States, and it decided that propaganda campaigns would be an effective way of turning Middle Eastern opinion against communism and towards the United States. This became even more important in the mid-1950s when the spread of Nasser's Arab nationalism led to a spike in anti-Western sentiment which provided a stumbling block for the United States' ability to conduct foreign policy in the region. Such propaganda efforts actually began under the Truman administration and then expanded when Eisenhower took office and formed the United States Information Agency (USIA) in August 1953. The propaganda operation run by USIA was central to combating the potential spread of Soviet influence in the region, which Eisenhower feared would disrupt the flow of Saudi oil to American allies. The President and Secretary of State Dulles particularly favored the use of propaganda in the conduct of foreign policy as it was much cheaper than anything involving the military.

Early on, output from the USIA in the form of pamphlets, posters, and radio broadcasts focused on describing the incompatibility of communism and religion and reflecting "the strong moral, spiritual, and religious convictions which motivate American life and actions."<sup>53</sup> The agency aimed to produce and spread material that demonstrated Americans' "respect for moral values and our capacity for moral action" and that exposed "materialistic atheistic communism for its denial of freedom and justice which are based upon moral, spiritual, and religious concepts."<sup>54</sup> Operating under the assumption that religion dictated the day-to-day lives of Muslims, US policymakers aimed to win over the Muslim world by demonstrating that, for Americans also, religion and moral values were main considerations in their decisions and

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<sup>53</sup> Morrison, "Faith Fights Communism," 78.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

actions from day to day. Robert L. John, who was Eisenhower's appointed leader of Voice of America, the USIA's radio program, stressed that broadcasts should emphasize "the importance of religion to our national life... we hope to reach them by showing that we, as a nation, are a religious people."<sup>55</sup>

Another common theme emphasized in the early propaganda material was that Islam, Christianity, and Judaism were "variations of a single ideology," and because of that, the Arab world and Americans "should be natural allies against atheistic communism."<sup>56</sup> In other words, the propaganda aimed to sell the idea of a "common spiritual partnership between Christians in the West and Muslims in the Middle East" in which communism was the "common enemy of all religious people."<sup>57</sup> Another program sought to draw connections between Christianity and Islam by discussing certain religious principles that appear in both the Bible and the Koran. The administration hoped that certain values common to both Muslims and Westerners would "prove stronger than any other connections that the Soviets might try to exploit."<sup>58</sup> Following the appearance of the Soviet leaflet in Saudi Arabia in late 1954 however, the Eisenhower administration decided to try a more specific set of themes.

Operating with the aim of mobilizing the supposed religious fervor of the Muslim world, the Eisenhower administration called for the propaganda materials to begin specifically emphasizing the threat of religious persecution of Muslims under communist rule.<sup>59</sup> In late 1954, a pamphlet titled "Red Star over Islam" entered the circulation. The pamphlet described the plight of Soviet Muslims who faced religious persecution at home and claimed to tell the "story

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<sup>55</sup> "Johnson Charts New 'Voice' Role," *New York Times*, April 11, 1953, <https://www.nytimes.com/1953/04/12/archives/johnson-charts-new-voice-role-information-director-will-put-stress.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Jacobs, "The Perils and Promise of Islam," 732.

<sup>57</sup> Morrison, "Faith Fights Communism," 79.

<sup>58</sup> Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy*, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Morrison, "Faith Fights Communism," 80.

of the Bolshevik struggle to destroy Islam and substitute the worship of Lenin for the worship of Allah.”<sup>60</sup> It told of how the Soviet government was restricting Soviet Muslims from traveling to Saudi Arabia for their annual pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the Hajj. The pamphlet addressed Muslim readers in a personal tone, asking that they consider their fellow Muslims in the Soviet Union who “have been subjected to one of the most brutal persecutions any people have ever faced.... They have been killed, tortured, and enslaved” solely for refusing “to abandon their faith and embrace the communist creed of the godless.”<sup>61</sup>

Another pamphlet told a similar story of a Muslim man who showed up for prayer at his Mosque and was sent away by a Soviet soldier who called him a “son of a sheepherder.”<sup>62</sup> The Soviets had begun shutting down Mosques, and Muslims began to meet in secret when it became dangerous to pray in public. The Soviet Muslims “paid lip service to the new anti-God ways but clung secretly to the teachings of Allah.”<sup>63</sup> Those who refused to be pushed underground and continued practicing in public eventually disappeared and were later found to have perished in communist labor camps. The story spoke of the starvation that Muslims faced in such camps, and how a surviving escapee “showed the scars on his flesh where he had been tortured with hot irons.”<sup>64</sup> These stories all represented the attempts by the American propaganda machine to scare the Muslim world into aligning with the United States by spreading false stories of religious persecution, something the administration figured would sow great fear into Islamic world because of its undying devotion to faith.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

Movies and films were another main product of the USIA propaganda machine, and the plots were often based on real events that the USIA felt could be exploited and framed in ways to earn favor from the Muslim world. The films featured the same themes as the pamphlets: the potential for religious cooperation between the West and the Muslim world, America's deep spirituality and respect for Islam, and the threat of religious persecution under the Soviets. As Nasser's Arab nationalism gained popularity, especially throughout the mid- to late 1950s, the films sought to dispel the increasingly popular notion that the United States was just as much a Western imperialist nation as Britain and France. Saudi Arabia was often at the center of the movie plots as the USIA thought it could exploit the supposed religious connection that Muslims felt towards the Kingdom.

One film, "Pilgrimage to Mecca," was based on Operation Hajj Baba, in which the US Air Force helped transport stranded Muslims from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia so they could complete their Hajj. This operation took place in 1952 under the Truman administration, but the film was released in the summer of 1953 during the Eisenhower administration. As the film shows, there was not enough room on planes in Beirut taking Muslims to Saudi Arabia, so the American government stepped in to supply airplanes to help transport the pilgrims. After many successful trips, by which the US Air Force transferred 3,763 Muslims to Saudi Arabia, King Saud handed Harold Minor, the US ambassador to Lebanon, a reimbursement check for the plane tickets.<sup>65</sup> Minor generously donated the check to the "Moslem Welfare Fund" on behalf of the US.<sup>66</sup> The narrator closes the film: "Thus ends the history of an event in which men of different faiths worked as brothers for good."<sup>67</sup> The implication was that the Western and Muslim worlds

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

could once again come together in a partnership of faith to keep the Soviets out of the region. The film seemed like a simple reenactment of a historical event, but the aim was to contrast American's supposed generosity and respect for Islam with the portrayals of Soviets as hostile to Islam and working to prevent Muslims from making the trip to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj. Eisenhower actually took a hint from Operation Hajj Baba and, in June 1956, loaned an American jet to the Afghan government to help in transporting Afghan Muslims to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj.

The propaganda campaign and the religious elements enshrined in the material that the government sought to spread around the region no doubt influenced Eisenhower's decision to enact a policy of building up King Saud. He not only had a history of seeking spiritual advantages based upon his misconceptions about people and their religious values, but was simultaneously influenced by his orientalist misconceptions about the Middle East and the potential to unite the region solely along religious lines. On top of that, the propaganda campaign's attempted use of religious messages to stoke anti-communism fervor and improve the image of the United States throughout the region set a precedent for the President to follow in deciding how to approach the region following the death of the Alpha plan. These ideas turned from propaganda to policy in the form of the Omega plan and, specifically, in Eisenhower's strategy for King Saud.

### **Part 2, Section 3: Omega, Suez, and the Oil Lift (Mid to Late 1956)**

Eisenhower's plan to build up King Saud wasn't very popular, though no one had the courage to break this to him. For the most part, other officials were fully on board with the plan to isolate Nasser and work to separate Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as this was a realistic objective.

Regarding the King Saud plan, however, the same consensus did not exist in the administration. The British, who were working in tandem with the administration on many of the Omega objectives, also endorsed the plan to detach Nasser and Saud; however, they doubted the potential of King Saud as a spiritual leader that could unite the region into a pro-West, anti-communist block. British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd described the plan as “rather unrealistic,” and British cabinet secretary Norman Brook said that they would be “backing a certain loser... if we tried to build up King Saud as the leader of the Arab World.”<sup>68</sup> It is important to note that the relationship between King Saud and the British government was deeply hostile throughout this period. Eisenhower’s confidence in this plan was rooted in his misconceptions about religion and the role that it played in people’s lives throughout the Middle East.

In April, the Eisenhower administration decided to delay the planned negotiations over funding for the Aswan Dam Project that Nasser was pursuing. Back in December, when working with Nasser was still part of the strategy, the US had made an official offer to fund the project, but Nasser refused it until the two parties could sit down for negotiations over the offer’s terms. In trying to shake up relations with Egypt as part of the Omega Plan, the administration continually delayed negotiations throughout the spring and summer in an effort to leave Nasser questioning his standing with the West. Then, on July 19, the US officially revoked the funding offer. A week later, on July 26, Nasser returned the favor by nationalizing the Suez Canal.

The nationalization of the canal was a big move on Nasser’s part. He won much acclaim throughout the Arab world for sticking it to the British, who were in control of the canal and collected the toll revenues. However, King Saud was not happy about Nasser’s decision. The

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 98.



move severely increased the risk of a Western attack on Egypt, which not only meant Saud would have to respond militarily as per his ESS obligation but also meant a possible disruption of oil shipments through the canal, to the detriment of the Saudi economy. Though Saud continued to publicly side with Nasser, it was around this period that he began turning away from Egypt, privately regretting the alliance he had formed a year prior. Omega seemed to be working, and the Eisenhower administration noticed the rift. However, this also boosted the President's confidence that he should continue the plan to bolster King Saud as a regional pan-Islamic leader.

In the fall, the Western attack finally came. On October 29, 1956, Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula followed by Britain and France a few days later. Eisenhower was furious. For one, the Western allies had failed to consult with the president about the invasion plan, so it came as a complete surprise. Moreover, Eisenhower feared that the Arab and Muslim worlds would turn against the West, and become more susceptible to Soviet influence, if the attack on Egypt continued and the United States failed to condemn it. Eisenhower quickly called for the Western allies to stop fighting, threatening to withhold oil shipments if they did not. After a little over a week, they complied. Having opposed the Western invasion, the United States won a degree of good favor from the Muslim world. King Saud referred to Eisenhower's opposition as "right and wise," and an Egyptian journalist praised Eisenhower as a "fighter for freedom."<sup>69</sup> However, even though the violence had ceased, there was another problem.

Following the initial outbreak of violence, the Egyptians closed the canal. This immediately posed a serious threat to the vitality of Western Europe as the canal provided the passageway for two-thirds of Europe's oil.<sup>70</sup> Not only did Eisenhower need to determine how to

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<sup>69</sup> Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 61.

<sup>70</sup> Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC*, 108.

restore the flow of oil to Europe, he needed to do so in a way that avoided any association with the Western powers that had just invaded the Middle East.<sup>71</sup> “We must face the question,” Eisenhower said, “what must we do in Europe and then the question, how do we square this with the Arabs?”<sup>72</sup> His solution to the oil issue was the creation of the Middle East Emergency Committee (MEEC), a group of private oil companies tasked with organizing an oil lift to Western allies using surplus oil from the US and Venezuela.<sup>73</sup> However, he still needed to implement the plan without creating the scene “in the eyes of the Arab world, of bailing out the British and the French.”<sup>74</sup> He did not want to lose any of the good favor earned from opposing the Western attack. To do this, Eisenhower turned to King Saud.

At the time of the Suez invasion, according to the President, “US relations with Saudi Arabia were very good.”<sup>75</sup> In the preceding months the two countries had diverged in the Cold War political arena with Saud’s joining of the ESS Pact, but in the economic arena, which mattered the most to King Saud, things were well. For one, American oil revenue was keeping the King happy, whereas he was about as far from happy with Nasser as he could be following the closure of the Suez Canal. The United States’ standing was then bolstered by the good favor earned from the Muslim world following Eisenhower’s decision to oppose the Western attack on Egypt. Really, though, the decision to oppose the invasion had more to do with avoiding a possible direct conflict with the Soviet Union, as well as Eisenhower’s fear that the invasion would turn the region even more so against the West, than it did with an altruistic stance against

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 108-109.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

breaching sovereignties. Regardless, Eisenhower saw the United States' moment of good standing as an opportunity.

In the short term, the Eisenhower wanted to use the United States' good relations with Saudi Arabia to ensure as little regional backfire from the oil lift plan as possible. "Saudi's acquiescence must be obtained," Eisenhower said, if the US was to pull off the oil lift plan without angering the Arab and Muslim supporters of the Arab Nationalist movement.<sup>76</sup> In other words, the US needed Saudi to promise to forgo a public reaction that would call attention to the oil lift. Of course, the idea that Saudi's acquiescence would remove the tinge of Western imperialism was flawed from the start, but Eisenhower's various misperceptions led him to the line of thinking. He would continue to employ Saudi in this way throughout the next couple years, failing to understand Saudi's regional unpopularity and that his association with any such policies and strategies actually did more harm than good.

Eisenhower was thinking long-term as well. He believed that, following the Suez Crisis, Americans "would have to be the ones to accomplish any restoration of western influence in the area," and that the US-Saudi relationship could provide the foundation for that effort.<sup>77</sup> More specifically, Eisenhower believed that a restoration of Western influence and power among the Arab and Muslim states of the region would hinge on the US's ability to build up King Saudi as "a great spiritual leader and keeper of the holy places."<sup>78</sup> Eisenhower pictured the King playing the role of a powerful pro-West regional leader who would not only restore Western influence, but also isolate Nasser and his regional influence, which seemed to invite Soviet expansion. The President also believed he could use Saudi's acquiescence and endorsement of various American

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

policies towards the region to smooth out the Arab and Muslim reception of such initiatives and avoid accusations of imperialism. In other words, Eisenhower turned to King Saud to solve both the immediate issue of restoring oil to Western Europe without angering the Arab world and the longer-term issue of restoring Western influence in the region as a way of containing Soviet expansion and influence.

However, like Eisenhower, the King faced the tricky situation of accommodating both Arab nationalism and cooperation with the Western states. Arab nationalism had already been steadily rising throughout the decade, but the Western invasion of late 1956 provided a boom for the movement. Saud felt the rise in popularity of Arab nationalism rather acutely because of his continuing relations with the Western powers. Though he had publicly aligned with Nasser, and by proxy the Arab nationalist movement, by joining the ESS Pact, it was not enough. He faced both regional and domestic pressure to halt the sale of oil to France and Britain, the Western states that had invaded the Arab world. Thus, shortly after the invasion, Saud banned all oil exports to the two states. Though this meant a cut in revenue, Saud knew it was politically necessary for him to do so. However, on top of the regional and domestic pressure, Saud also faced pressure from Eisenhower, who wanted the King to persuade Nasser to reopen the Suez Canal. The President tried to badger the King by threatening to turn elsewhere for oil if it seemed the canal would remain closed for an extended period of time. For Saud, the loss of British and French revenue hurt but was tolerable. However, the loss of American revenue on top of that meant an all but guaranteed financial and political crisis. It also meant that the King would have to tone down his opulent lifestyle. This was a problem. So, it was within this context that Saud welcomed a chance to prove his desire to remain on good terms with the US. On November 23, 1956, he agreed to cooperate with the oil lift, contingent on the withdrawal of French and British

troops from the canal zone, which began on December 3.<sup>79</sup> The oil lift began a few days later, on December 7.

With the oil lift solving the immediate issue of maintaining the flow of oil to Western Europe, Eisenhower refocused on the bigger issue of containment. It was important that the administration not allow the Soviets to exploit the Suez Crisis to increase their regional influence. The OMEGA Plan and its main strategy of isolating Nasser was still guiding the administration's policies toward the Middle East, and the administration continued to focus on separating King Saud and Nasser. However, Saud's cooperation with the oil lift reassured Eisenhower that he should continue to work with the King, and that the plan to build up King Saud as a pro-West, pan-Arab religious leader of the region who could counter Nasser's popularity and influence was a sound one. However, as Nathan Citino points out, Eisenhower didn't see that the Suez Crisis had essentially highlighted Saud's political and financial weaknesses.<sup>80</sup>

It should have been clear to Eisenhower that the King was too restrained by regional and domestic political vulnerabilities to inhabit the regional leadership role that the President had envisioned for him. Nevertheless, as the Suez Crisis calmed, Eisenhower continued to focus on using King Saud as a containment tool, regarding him as "the basis for isolating Nasser and maintaining friendly relations with Arab and Muslim states."<sup>81</sup> On December 12, Eisenhower wrote to Secretary of State Dulles, "I continue to believe, as I think you do, that one of the measures that we must take is to build up an Arab rival of Nasser," and that King Saud was the "natural choice" for the position.<sup>82</sup> While Eisenhower and his advisors may not have been in

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

agreement about the future role of King Saud, they all agreed that the Middle East must be a top foreign policy priority for the time being. This sentiment turned to policy in early January when Eisenhower delivered his “Special Message to Congress on the Situation in the Middle East.” The policy that Eisenhower outlined during this speech soon became known as the Eisenhower doctrine.

### **Part 3, Section 4: Saudi Arabia and the Eisenhower Doctrine (Early 1957 to Late 1957)**

Following the Suez Crisis, the Eisenhower administration feared that the loss of British and French influence in the region would lead to the emergence of a power vacuum that the Soviets would seek to fill. Eisenhower knew the US couldn’t send in military forces to directly fill the void as this would bolster accusations of imperialism. Instead, the US would offer aid and support to states in the region. If, as expected, only pro-West states accepted the aid, this would increase their strength and stature, better enabling them to project power to fill the regional vacuum. A more remote possibility was that Soviet-leaning Arab states like Egypt and Syria would also accept U.S. aid. This scenario would be even more beneficial, as it would mean that those countries weren’t leaning as far to the East as US officials feared. On January 5, 1957, the President went before Congress to announce the proposal and seek its approval.

The President’s speech was filled with mentions of freedom, independence, and peace in the region, and there was no lack of religious rhetoric. After denouncing the Soviet Union’s goals of “dominating the Middle East” and “communizing the world,” the President lamented the possibility of the “holy places of the Middle East” falling prey to a “rule that glorifies atheistic materialism.”<sup>83</sup> Of course, he did not specify which holy places he was referring to, be it those of

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<sup>83</sup> “January 5, 1957: The Eisenhower Doctrine,” Presidential Speeches, The Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-5-1957-eisenhower-doctrine>.

Israel/Palestine or Saudi Arabia. The President emphasized the necessity of taking further action to protect the region and preserve its cultures and religions in order that they may continue to uplift “the spirits of the peoples.”<sup>84</sup>

Referring to the supposed regional vacuum that had emerged, Eisenhower stressed that any areas lacking power “should be made good, not by external or alien force, but by the increased vigor and security of the independent nations of the area.”<sup>85</sup> To make such increases, the President announced that the United States would assist, economically and militarily, those states “dedicated to the preservation of independence and resistance to subversion.”<sup>86</sup> However, being careful to avoid an imperialist image, the President stressed that the United States would deploy armed forces only in the event of a communist attack, and only after a direct request for support from the attacked nation. Reactions to the proposal, both at home and abroad, were skeptical at best.

While the resolution passed through the House, it stalled in the Senate until March. Common critiques took aim at the proposal’s substantive and geographical vagueness and questioned whether aiding Arab states would pose a threat to Israel. Others focused on Saudi Arabia, and employed the gulf kingdom as an embodiment of why the region did not need American aid. “I am not against economic assistance,” said Senator Herbert Humphrey, Democrat of Minnesota. “But I want to know how much King Saud is going to get. I want to know how much these oil-rich countries are going to get.”<sup>87</sup> Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon, also a Democrat, asked if “the aid and military support... is going to make Saudi Arabia more

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC*, 122.

democratic?”<sup>88</sup> Arab states were also skeptical and reluctant to take a public stance in favor or against the doctrine, especially as the region continued to polarize. Eisenhower quickly realized that it was not going to be easy to sell the doctrine, whether at home or abroad. Thus, he turned to his Arabian fixer for help.

King Saud arrived in the United States on January 29. Officially, the aim of the visit was to finish negotiations over the lease renewal for the American air base in Saudi Arabia. However, still pursuing the strategy of building up King Saud, Eisenhower hoped that the visit could be used to increase Saud’s stature and lend an image of leadership potential. The President also hoped that, after some in-person discussions with the King about the Eisenhower Doctrine, Saud would return home, endorse the doctrine, and garner further regional support for it. Eisenhower knew that most of the Arab opposition to the doctrine was emanating from the widespread skepticism of Western policies and initiatives in the region. Though Iraq and Lebanon had responded favorably to the doctrine, Eisenhower wanted an endorsement from Saud because of his relations with Egypt and Syria. As Citino puts it, “courting Saud was not just a strategy for containing communism but was also a way to render palatable to Arab and Muslim countries” various Western policies and initiatives. Of course, it would be all the better if that endorsement came from the keeper of Islam’s holy places. However, this is not quite what happened.

The King’s visit turned into a rather outrageous display and did not exactly inspire an image of leadership potential. While foreign dignitaries were supposed to bring no more than 12 guests on visits to the States, the King showed up with an 80-person posse of aides, attendants, and wives.<sup>89</sup> The group filled up Blair House, the official residence of foreign visitors, and

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> “The Return of the King – Saud Visits to US,” *Moments in U.S. Diplomatic History, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Arlington VA*, <https://adst.org/2015/11/return-of-the-king-saud-visits-the-us/>.



spilled over into the Sheraton hotel. The King's bodyguards slept in tents across from the White House. In passing, the King would hand out gifts such as gold watches or hundred dollar bills to American officials. Critics capitalized on the comical display, contrasting Saud's opulence with the poverty of the Saudi people who lived under his autocratic rule. House Democrat George McGovern of South Dakota questioned, "Do we build strength against communism by contributing American tax dollars to perpetuate this kind of feudal despotism?"<sup>90</sup>

While Saud was in town, Eisenhower sought to capitalize on the newly opened mosque and Islamic cultural center, together known as the Washington Islamic Center, in DC. He arranged for Saud to visit the center, and the USIA quickly turned the spectacle into a propaganda film. Employing the usual religious themes that frequently appeared in American propaganda targeting the Middle East, the film mentions how the center "was funded by Islam's many generous friends in the United States" and emphasized the King's "role as a spiritual leader for the entire Muslim world."<sup>91</sup> Another film glorified the new mosque as a "symbol of progress" and spoke of Islam's "religious and cultural contributions to the modern world."<sup>92</sup> It also emphasized the close links between the three major monotheistic religions and how, as proven by various quotes in the Koran, the "same religious principles established by the prophet Mohammad were also inspired by the teachings of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus."<sup>93</sup>

The irony of Eisenhower's displaying the United States' "good" relationship with Saudi Arabia and King Saud as a way of showing America's respect for Islam and attempting ward off comparisons to the other Western imperialist nations was that much of the Middle East despised Saudi Arabia for that exact thing: its relationship with the United States. Thus, while American

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<sup>90</sup> Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 102.

<sup>91</sup> Morrison, "Faith Fights Communism," 102.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

officials thought they were working towards improved relations with the region, they were actually sabotaging their own efforts by showcasing their favor for a despised regime, which did nothing more than contribute to feelings of anti-Americanism in the region.

Midway through the King's weeklong visit, Eisenhower spoke to congressional leaders about his continued desire to build up the King, and how Saud's religious authority would overcome his various deficiencies that had been on full display throughout the week. The comic spectacle of Saud's visit changed nothing for the President, who was steadfast in his plan for the King and saw "nothing to show he's not the person we should tie to."<sup>94</sup> By the end of the week, Eisenhower and Saud had worked out a renewal for the air base in exchange for increased aid, and Saud publicly declared the Doctrine to be "a good one which is entitled to consideration and appreciation" by other Arab leaders.<sup>95</sup> This satisfied Eisenhower, but it was far from a formal endorsement.

It was around this time that King Saud had begun to acquire a special middle-man position in the region. As one of the pro-West conservative monarchs of the region, his membership in the ESS Pact was unique. Though it was rooted more in the kingdom's rivalry with Iraq than with a preference for Nasser and the Soviets, Saud still enjoyed a seat at the table on both sides of the monarchist-republican divide in the Arab world. This became especially true near the end of Saud's stay in the US when he met with Iraqi crown prince Abd al-Ilah, who happened to be in the States as well. The meeting was a big moment as the leaders planned official visits to each other's countries, agreed to exchange ambassadors, and promised to refrain from slandering each other by means of propaganda. The meeting began a period of rapprochement between the two historic rivals which then bolstered Saud's middle-man position

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 104.

as he seemed to be getting on with leaders in both the Baghdad Pact and ESS Pact even as the region continued to polarize.

It was not that Saud was feeling warm-hearted and decided to make things right with Iraq. He was positioning himself for regional leadership. Both Eisenhower and Nasser had been flattering Saud. They talked up his leadership potential and constantly tried to pull him further into their orbits, and it was all going to his head. He began to think he could work his way into a regional position to rival that of Nasser. At the time, Saud was still upset with the Egyptian leader over the closure of the Suez Canal and was leaning more towards the West, especially following the rapprochement with Iraq. Whereas Eisenhower thought Saud could use Islam to gain such a position and subsequently take a staunch pro-West stance, the King believed he could acquire a position of regional leadership by simply vacillating between opposing positions and never coming out strong in favor of any one side, though always sure to take public positions compatible with Arab nationalist ideologies. This discrepancy played out in various episodes throughout the year as President Eisenhower continued to use King Saud as his regional fixer while Saud maintained his regional relations thanks to his intermediary position.

After the Eisenhower Doctrine was officially approved in March, the administration refocused on gaining endorsements of the policy from Arab leaders. King Hussein of Jordan seemed to favor the proposal, but he would not publicly endorse it for fear of a hostile Jordanian public. Leftist and conservative Islamic elements within the country both decried the proposal as imperialistic and an “infidel’ intrusion into the Moslem world.”<sup>96</sup> At the time, the pro-West King Hussein was facing pressure from leftist elements within the state. In early April, the king put down two supposed coup attempts emanating from nationalist officers within the army and

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 125.

forcibly expelled Jordan's prime minister who kept pressuring the King to move closer to Egypt. This all took place within a chaotic couple of weeks, and the Eisenhower administration wasn't particularly worried until Syrian troops started moving towards Jordan, as King Hussein figured, to support what seemed to be a coup attempt. Knowing that direct intervention "might brand Hussein an American puppet," Eisenhower turned to Saudi Arabia.

First, King Saud gave King Hussein command of the Saudi troops that were stationed in Jordan so that Hussein would be better situated to counter a potential Syrian attack. Shortly after this, the Syrian troops returned to base and King Hussein was convinced that their retreat was a result of Saud's actions. Saud then gave Hussein a \$250,000 grant so that he could pay his army and further ensure their loyalty. Iraq also chipped in to help Hussein a bit, and it began to appear as if a proper regional alliance was forming between the three Arab monarchies. Though it is not clear how much of a role the Eisenhower administration played in Saud's actions towards Jordan, Eisenhower had encouraged Saud to come to Hussein's side and was satisfied with the decisions the King made, reminding him of why Saud was so central to the administration's policies in the region. Simultaneously, Eisenhower interpreted Saud's cooperation as validation that he should continue working to build up Saud as a regional religious leader. Nasser picked up on this and privately complained that King Saud was "playing [the] American game in [the] Mid-East."<sup>97</sup> However, in the summer, the US-Saudi relationship hit a bump.

King Saud was prone to giving anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist speeches and constantly tried to avoid public association with the U.S. Largely for this reason, he still hadn't publicly endorsed the Eisenhower Doctrine. However, when it came to policy and less public matters, he typically aligned with the United States. That is, except for the Gulf of Aqaba issue.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 132.

The Gulf of Aqaba was a small body of water between northwestern Saudi Arabia and the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula. The channel was vital for Israeli shipping, but when Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, he also blockaded the Gulf of Aqaba from the Israelis. However, the Suez War ended that blockage, and Israel's resumed presence in the canal did not sit well with King Saud. The Eisenhower Administration argued that Aqaba was an open, international waterway while Saud argued that the Israelis should be banned from the waterway once more, as allowing them to use it following the war was essentially rewarding their attack. Saud also argued that as "keeper of the Holy Places of Islam" he was called to protect the waterway from foreign presence as Muslims used it for pilgrimage routes to Mecca.<sup>98</sup> To this, Eisenhower replied that "Saud is acting as the head of the Moslem religion and not as head of state."<sup>99</sup> As Salim Yaqub points out, this was of course ironic as it was because of "Saudi Arabia's religious pretensions that Eisenhower had sought to promote Saud in the first place."<sup>100</sup>

Nasser saw the US-Saudi disagreement as a moment of opportunity, and, in an effort to stroke Saud's ego and stoke the tension between Saud and Eisenhower, Nasser "encouraged Saud to be the Arab's spokesman on the issue."<sup>101</sup> Saud accepted this veiled offer of rapprochement from Nasser as a means of keeping up his middle-man act in the region, but really he continued to turn against Egypt and work towards closer relations with Jordan, Iraq, and other pro-West states in private. However, Saud's efforts to position himself for regional leadership, a big part of which meant avoiding public association with the U.S., would continue to cost the U.S. in the summer and fall.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 144

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Following the Suez War, the Syrian government took a leftward turn and grew much more hostile to the West. The country continued to radicalize throughout the early and middle months of 1957, and in June, the two-sided polarization of the Arab world peaked.

Simultaneously peaking, however, was King Saud's hunger for regional power. Though he was locked into the pro-West camp substantively on basically every issue but Aqaba, the King continued to appease various actors in the radical camp much to the Eisenhower's dismay, especially when it came to the Syrian Crisis of 1957.

On August 12, 1957, Syrian officials announced their discovery of an American-orchestrated coup attempt against the Syrian government. The Eisenhower Administration denied the allegations, but the damage was done. The US-Syria relationship hit a new low. Eisenhower was worried about the vital Saudi and Iraqi oil pipelines that ran through Syria. If the Syrian government decided to purposely damage the pipelines to spite the West, as they had during the Suez War, it could be a disaster. However, the administration was also worried that Syria's radicalization was "part of a broader Soviet offensive that could not go unchecked."<sup>102</sup> The alternative, Eisenhower remarked, was "to do nothing and lose the whole Middle East to Communism."<sup>103</sup> Thus, the President decided to act. Once again, knowing Arab public opinion would not permit direct US action in the region, Eisenhower turned to King Saud.

The plan was to goad pro-West Arab states like Iraq and Jordan into overthrowing the Syrian regime, with King Saud cheerleading the effort from the sidelines. Eisenhower believed Saud's support of such an effort, because of his middle man position in the region, would alleviate any tension that might occur between the two regional camps should an intervention go down in Damascus. However, Eisenhower also had a backup plan. He decided that the US would

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 164.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 161.

directly intervene in Syria should the pro-West Arab states be reluctant to make any moves against Syria. Channeling his orientalist misperceptions, Eisenhower thought he could use Saud to convince the Muslim world that, if the US did resort to direct action in Syria, such action was “being taken to protect Islam against militant atheism.”<sup>104</sup> President Eisenhower wrote to King Saud on August 21: “In view of the special position of Your Majesty as Keeper of the Holy Places of Islam, I trust that you will exert your great influence to the end that the atheistic creed of Communism will not become entrenched at a key position in the Moslem world.”<sup>105</sup> Secretary of State Dulles wrote to the US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia on August 27: “As [the] President has already conveyed to the King, it is our hope that King [Saud] as Guardian [of the] Holy Places and bearer [of] special responsibility in [the] Moslem world will direct his political and moral influence against this alien influence.”<sup>106</sup> As Salim Yaqub puts it, “Eisenhower hoped that King Saud, as Keeper of the Holy Places of Islam, would denounce the Syrian regime as an affront to Islam and sanctify the attack on Syria as a crusade against Soviet encroachment.”<sup>107</sup> Of course, this falls in line with Eisenhower’s constant misperception that Saud’s acquiescence in American meddling in the region would remove the tinge of Western imperialism.

Saud refused to comply with Eisenhower’s suggestions as it was simply too politically risky for him to publicly side with the U.S. over Syria, especially considering the Eisenhower administration’s recent support for Israel in the Gulf of Aqaba drama. The other pro-West Arab states were equally reluctant to make any moves against Syria and potentially break the façade of regional pan-Arabism. Eisenhower continued to underestimate and misunderstand several factors

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Department of the State. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume XIII: Jordan-Yemen, No. 281.

<sup>107</sup> Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 162

about the Middle East. First and foremost, he continued to misunderstand the role that Islam played in Muslims' lives. Of course, there were the deeply devout Muslims who might be swayed by the word of King Saud due to his supposed religious credentials, but this was by no means the majority of the Muslim world. Most of the Muslim world looked at King Saud and saw a weak monarch of a single Arab country, not a pan-Islamic leader. Secondly, Eisenhower continued to underestimate the level and power of anti-Western and anti-American sentiment that was permeating the region. Third, Eisenhower's inability to see events on the ground in the Middle East through a regional political lens, rather than an international Cold War lens, led him to misunderstand the political dynamics of Arab nationalism. These misperceptions led Eisenhower to build certain faith-based strategies around Saud that were bound to fail every time. Though the King rejected the President's initial plan, Eisenhower continued to believe that the administration should do "everything possible to stress the 'holy war' aspect by enlisting Saud."<sup>108</sup> Finally, in mid-September, a series of events ended Eisenhower's delusions about employing Saud in the Syrian Crisis.

On September 10, the Soviet foreign minister publicly accused the U.S. of orchestrating an attack on Syria that would include help from other states in the region. The Syrian leader suspected Saudi Arabia and Iraq were possibly involved and shrewdly invited King Saud and Iraqi Prime Minister Ali Jawdat to meet with him in Syria to discuss the situation on September 26. Really though, he was forcing them to publicly showcase their loyalty to the Arab cause. Following the meeting, Saud publicly denounced the idea that Syria was any threat to its neighbors, legitimizing the Syrian regime as "entitled to the solidarity of fellow Arab states."<sup>109</sup> This was the best possible move Saud could have made in his quest for regional leadership as the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 168.



Arab world interpreted his visit to Syria as having stopped an impending Western attack on the region. In turn, Saud enjoyed a nice spike in regional stature. However, in mid-October, Nasser, possibly feeling a little threatened by Saud's moment, shrewdly diverted the spotlight onto himself.

On October 13, Nasser deployed 1500 troops to a Syrian town near the Turkish border. The spoken purpose was to protect Syria from Turkish aggression as Turkey had been amassing troops on the Turkey-Syria border in preparation for whatever might come. However, it is more likely that Nasser, being the genius political calculator that he was, saw an opportunity to not only one-up all the other Arab states in their shows of solidarity with Syria, but to show his commitment to the Arab cause by creating the image of protecting the broader Arab world from a Western attack. Saud was furious to say the least, and this was probably the moment when the King completely turned against Nasser, but not publicly of course. On October 16, Syria submitted a complaint to the United Nations General Assembly about the Turkish deployment. On October 20, Saud having spotted an opportunity to hope back into the limelight and, employed his middle man position in the region and offered to mediate the Syrian-Turkey in lieu of the United Nations. By eventually rejecting the mediation offer, Syrian officials "tarnished their image in the Arab world, making opposition to the Damascus regime less politically risky" for the other states of the region like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and even Nasser's Egypt which thought Syria had gone too far with the Soviets. The Syrian regime realized its mistake and on November 1 revoked its complaint to the General Assembly, and Turkey withdrew its troops in mid-November. After that, the crisis died down, but not without having left its mark on the region's political dynamics.

By the end of 1957, both Syria and Egypt were taking steps away from the Soviets. In December, Western diplomats began receiving “numerous reports of Nasser’s and the [Syrian] Ba’thists’ growing unhappiness with the communists.”<sup>110</sup> Nasser had also expressed anxiety over how close the Syrians had gotten to the Soviets. The pro-West Arab states like Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia were ready to take a tougher stance on Syria now that the political barrier had fallen. It also appeared that the Eisenhower administration was nearing a better understanding of the regional dynamics that it had spent the last few years overlooking and underestimating. An intelligence report in late 1957 noted that the Eisenhower Doctrine essentially proved to the Arab world how detached the American government was from the true feelings and sentiments of the Middle East. The Eisenhower Administration’s collective mind simply couldn’t understand that the Arabs and Muslims of the Middle East felt much more threatened by Zionism and Western imperialism than they did by communism. It seemed American officials were beginning to better understand how much failing to consider that dynamic was a liability to their Middle East policies.

## **Conclusion**

In early 1958, King Saud found himself in the spotlight once again when a Syrian intelligence officer publicly revealed that Saud had paid him to arrange the assassination of Nasser. This was the last straw in a period of internal struggle within the Saudi royal family that had begun years earlier following the death of King Abd al-Aziz, the father of Saud and his half-brother Faisal. Faisal had disputed Saud’s accession over him following Abd al-Aziz’s death but settled for the position of Saudi Crown Prince and, throughout the early and mid-1950s, showed

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 177.

himself to be much fitter for leadership than Saud. Following the revelation of Saud's attempt to have Nasser assassinated, the King found himself alienated from the royal family, and all its members began to push for Faisal to take over. On March 24, 1958, the twelve eldest princes approached Saud and demanded that he hand over power to his half-brother. Knowing he was beat, Saud acquiesced. Faisal was promoted to prime minister, and, while King Saud remained in his position, he was stripped of all political power and essentially relegated to a figurehead position.

The Eisenhower administration looked on with wide eyes. It had always worried about Faisal as he seemed to be less anti-Communist than Saud and had made overtures toward Nasser on multiple occasions. However, the administration began to realize that Faisal was more anti-Communist than they initially figured, and that his moves toward Nasser had been more about quelling domestic nationalist dissent than about any serious leanings towards the East. Nevertheless, as Saud found himself helplessly removed from power, President Eisenhower, reluctant to see his Arabian fixer lose the respect and regional position of strength that never actually existed, "continued to support Saud and even raised the possibility of sending troops to strengthen the King during the March 1958 crisis."<sup>111</sup>

Throughout the first half of Eisenhower's Presidency, Saudi Arabia, and more specifically King Saud, became central tools in the administration's policies towards the Middle East. Eisenhower's interest in the gulf kingdom lay not only in his desire to protect American access to oil, but also in the supposed utility of the Saudi King, because of his relationship to Islam, in stopping the spread of Soviet influence into the region. Eisenhower's belief that Saud

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<sup>111</sup> Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC*, 138.

and his kingdom could be used in such a way was rooted a set of orientalist misperceptions Eisenhower held about Islam, Saudi Arabia, and the Middle East as a whole.

First, the President wrongly believed that all Muslims are deeply religious, and that faith was more important to them than any other social, cultural, or political considerations. Second, Eisenhower wrongly believed that Islam could be used to unite the Muslim world even in the face of strong political divisions. Third, Eisenhower wrongly believed that King Saud already held a level respect in the Muslim world because of his position, and that Saud's endorsement of various American policies toward the region would remove the tinge of Western imperialism that came with America's attempts to conduct foreign policy in the Middle East.

These misperceptions led Eisenhower to craft flawed policies and strategies toward the region. The most glaring example was his idea that the U.S. could build up King Saud as a regional spiritual leader to rival Nasser's position as the undisputed leader of the Arab world. Another flawed plan was based on Eisenhower's idea that Saud, for one, would actually endorse a direct American attack on Syria, and two, that such an endorsement would actually render an American attack on Syria acceptable to the Arab world. Many of these flawed strategies resulted not only from Eisenhower's misperceptions but also from his lack of understanding about the on-the-ground political dynamics of the Middle East. He underestimated and overlooked the strength of anti-Zionist and anti-Western sentiment in the region, and completely missed how unpopular Saud, because of his authoritarian tendencies, was throughout the region. Each time the President sought Saud's endorsement or acquiescence on American policies, he was actively undermining his own attempt to make those policies more palatable to Arab public opinion. In other words, Saud's association with policies actually turned the Arab public opinion farther against such initiatives.

William Bowers points out that it was during this period that the United States and Saudi Arabia developed a relational flexibility that allowed “both partners to flirt in fields loathed by the other without threatening the long-term relationship.”<sup>112</sup> This flexibility was not necessarily unique to the US-Saudi relationship; it was this same type of flexibility that led the US to support authoritarian leaders in lieu of left-wing or nationalist leaders throughout the entirety of the Cold War. However, when it comes to the US-Saudi relationship, that flexibility still exists today and permits a continued relationship even in light of Saudi Arabia’s brutish and authoritarian tendencies. Most recently, we have seen this in the form of Jamal Khashoggi’s murder and in Saudi Arabia’s current role in the Yemeni Civil War. It is my wish that this examination of the US-Saudi relationship’s early days permits, at the very least, some sort of reexamination of our continuing relationship, in its present form, with Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>112</sup> Bowers, “Saudi Arabia and the United States’ Plan for Middle East Defense,” 2.

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