THE FOREIGN POLICY OF IBN SAUD 1936-39

By D. C. WATT

T ... 945 is of considerable importance in ... bian foreign policy. In 1930, the ... racy of uncertain stability, mainly interc ... immediate Arab neighbours, Iraq, Tran... ...e Trucial coast. The only world power to be interested in her activities, and of whose actions she had to take account, was Britain, under whose general protection stood all the Arab countries on her borders excepting only the Yemen. Italy and Soviet Russia were beginning to show an interest, the Russians scoring a certain success with shipments of goods at a time when Saudi credit elsewhere was exhausted. But this was only of minor importance. By 1945 Saudi Arabia was wealthy, her king the recipient of glowing messages from Churchill and Roosevelt, and she had acceded to the United Nations, a stage as large as the world could offer.

The turning-point clearly came during the war, with Abdul-Aziz ibn Saud's decision to cleave to the Allies, a decision he stood by even in the darkest days of 1942. Saudi Arabian oil became of importance in the war economy of the Allies, and she became the recipient of lend-lease aid. As a result of this, Abdul-Aziz died in the aura of western friendship, eulogized in the obituary columns of *The Times* as a long-standing and loyal friend of Britain. Similar *encomia* were showered on him on the far side of the Atlantic, save only that there his loyalty to the United States was the virtue for which his memory was celebrated. It is interesting, therefore, to examine the other side of the coin—to see how he represented himself to the Nazis, and to the Italians. The German archives reveal a rather different version of his views, though one with remarkable parallels to that held in the Anglo-Saxon countries. Abdul-Aziz ibn Saud was clearly adept in being all things to all men. To the west he used the language of friendship, loyalty and ideological affinity. To Germany he spoke of the threatening and alien hand of Britain. Clearly Saudi policy was governed by the interplay of general Arab interests, and its central aim the maintenance and enhancement of ibn Saud's prestige, position and power. His weapons were the geographical position of his realm, and the position conferred on him in western eyes by the possession of the Holy Cities. In western eyes these gave him an importance (and a position from which to bargain and to invite courtship) quite as valuable to them as the goods, arms and subsidies they had to offer. His policy was one of balance, in which he played off one power against the other by telling their representatives what they might be most expected to welcome hearing.

The conduct of Saudi foreign relations lay nominally in the hands of ibn Saud's second surviving son, the Amir Feisal. On his staff the latter had a curious and somewhat unsavoury crew of expatriate Arabs. His nominal deputy was Fuad Bey Hamza, a Druse from the Lebanon, subsequently Saudi minister in Paris and Ankara. The major part in the negotiations with Germany was played by Yusuf Yasin, a Syrian from Latakia, head of ibn Saud's own personal secretariat, who negotiated the treaty of friendship with Italy in 1931, and who also dealt with Sir George Rendel on the latter's visit to Riyadh in 1937. He succeeded Fuad Bey Hamza in 1941. Since ibn Saud reserved all decisions in the field of foreign relations to himself, Yasin's position close to his ear gave the latter far more opportunity to influence the direction of policy than either Feisal or Fuad Bey. Foreign diplomats usually resided in Jiddah, only making occasional visits to Riyadh. Indeed, Sir Andrew Ryan remarked of his period as British minister, that Saudi Arabia was the only nation not represented at Jiddah. The Amil Feisal, as Viceroy of the Hejaz, resided at Mecca. Communication with foreign diplomats occurred mainly through telegraphic dispatches from Yasin's secretariat via Mecca to Fuad Bey at Jiddah. Ibn Saud visited Jiddah, which he disliked, as little as possible.

Allied with Yasin were ibn Saud's personal physician, Madhat Al Ard, a Damascene, and an elderly Tripolitanian merchant, Khalid Abi'l Walid Al Qarqani, who had entered Saudi Arabia originally as a refugee from Italian rule in company with a German trader, a certain De Haas in the 1920s. De Haas had left Jiddah in high dudgeon in 1930 when the Saudi exchequer proved unable to meet its debts to him. But Al Qarqani remained, to become a member of ibn Saud's privy council. He was notoriously pro-German.

Up to the year 1936 Saudi foreign policy seems to have been governed by three considerations. First was the need to obtain recognition from her Arab neighbours of her equal status as an Arab State. Second was the urgent necessity of finding some way to repair the disastrous loss of revenue suffered as a result of the impact of the world depression on the numbers of pilgrims visiting the Holy Cities in the annual pilgrimages. Thirdly was the need to avoid involvement in Mussolini's push to build up Italian influence in the Red Sea and around the Horn of Africa. Thus a prolonged trade dispute with Kuwait was ended by ibn Saud's visit to Kuwait in January 1936. In April of the same year a Treaty of Arab Brotherhood and Alliance was signed with Iraq. The Yemen acceded to this in April 1937. In May diplomatic relations with Egypt, broken in 1926, were resumed with the signature of a Treaty of Friendship. By these treaties, ibn Saud won acceptance as an Arab sovereign recognized as such by other Arab governments. Only Amir Abdullah of Transjordan remained hostile, not surprisingly in view of ibn Saud's refusal to abandon his claims on Aqaba and Ma'an.

The economic position was more difficult. The British subsidy was ended in 1925. Anxiety over the fall in income from the pilgrim traffic led to the introduction of American oil interests and the award of the first oil concession in 1933 to the highest bidder, the Californian-Arabian Oil Company. Oil in commercial quantities was not produced until 1939,

though the terms of the concession gave the Saudi exchequer £50,000 on signature of the concession, £20,000 in 1934-35, £5,000 annual rent thereafter until 1938 when the discovery of oil in commercial quantities at Dammam upped the annual income to £50,000 again. Ibn Saud, true to the tradition of his desert forebears, despised money and left its provision to his Treasurer, the only Saudi among his personal staff, Abdullah es Suleiman. The Saudi exchequer was in default both to German and Polish creditors in 1937, and in 1938 the Soviet mission was wound up, presumably on similar grounds.

The Italian threat manifested itself as early as 1927 with the Italo-Yemeni treaty of that year and the consequent provision of Italian arms and technicians. In fact this amounted to very little, but the fact and the talk could not but have alarmed ibn Saud, and appears to have been one of the motives which prompted ibn Saud to his assault on the Yemen in 1934. If any Italian intervention to protect their protégé, the Iman Yahya, was considered, the presence of a British warship at Hodeida forestalled it. In the peace negotiations ibn Saud is said to have insisted on a reduction of Italian influence, but with little success. Italian aid to the Yemen continued, judiciously fostered by the distribution of bribes, and the Italian treaty with the Yemen was renewed in 1937. During the Italian attack on Abyssinia, ibn Saud permitted the merchants of Jiddah to trade with Italian East Africa, supplying foodstuffs, sheep and baggage animals for the use of the Italian forces; or, at least, so Yusuf Yasin claimed in 1939.

Relations with Britain seemed in 1936 and the first six months of 1937 at their most friendly: ibn Saud's two sons, the Amirs Saud and Feisal, visited Britain in 1935. In March 1937, Sir George Rendel, then head of the Eastern Department in the Foreign Office, returned the visit. In private conversations all the outstanding issues in Anglo-Saudi relations with the exception of the Saudi frontier with the Trucial sheikdoms and with the Hadramaut were settled. Solemn and public vows of friendship were exchanged. There were nevertheless signs of new troubles on the horizon. News of Harold Ingram's gradual pacification of the Hadramauti blood-feuds filtered north to Riyadh, becoming inevitably distorted on the way. The Sheikh of Bahrein's call in 1936 for an economic and political union of the states of the Arab gulf was equally unwelcome.

But of far more importance was the first outbreak of the Arab rising in Palestine in April 1936. The establishment of the Supreme Arab Committee in Palestine gave Arab nationalism a voice just as the troubles themselves gave it a focus. At the beginning, ibn Saud does not seem to have been unduly unsettled by the matter. He had no borders with Palestine, and no Jewish immigration threatened the Hijaz. He took his part in the appeal of the Arab kings of October 11, 1936. It fitted both into his need to maintain British good-will and into his policy of seeking recognized status as an Arab monarch. But the renewed outbreaks of July-August 1937 which followed publication of the Peel Commission's report recommending partition of Palestine saw a marked deterioration in his position. The other Arab rulers, of Egypt, Iraq and Transjordan made well-publicized protest. Amir Abdullah, his old rival, played a lively part in supporting the rebels and made no secret of his hopes of absorbing Pales-

tine into a greater Jordan. Iraq called for a conference of Arab states at Bludan in Syria in September 1937, and backed Abdullah's plan for a union of Palestine and Transjordan, on the plea that this alone could reconcile the Arabs to increased Jewish immigration. Radio, newspaper and word of mouth carried echoes of the agitation all over the Arab world, and made it difficult for ibn Saud for long to evade taking a more positive stand. The Emir Saud made his public protest in Paris in July 1937. But, apart from this, ibn Saud's only recorded activity was to frighten the Californian-Arabian Oil Company into representations to the State Department against diplomatic action in support of Jewish claims in Palestine, and to dispatch a violent letter of protest to Nuri es Said when the latter's negotiations with Dr. Magnus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem became known.

He did, however, express himself very freely to Captain Dickson of the Kuwait Petroleum Company in October, on the latter's visit to Riyadh, requesting that his views be reported direct to the British Government. He complained that the British policy in Palestine was making his position impossible. From all over the Arab world came appeals to him as Imam " to break with the English and save Palestine for its people by war." He was determined, he said, not to do this. England was his only potential ally, Italy, Germany and Turkey being ravening wolves, whose present friendliness towards Saudi Arabia hid the aim of devouring her later. His main difficulty lay, he said, with the Ikhwan of the Nejd, whose " senses were only in their eyes." Although this reference to a possible repetition of the Ikhwan border raids of 1925-30 was one to which the British might be expected to be most susceptible, it could well have been a real fear on his part. They had caused him a great deal of trouble in the early days after his conquest of the Hijaz; and we know from the German archives of at least one Hashemite conspiracy at this date which claimed support among the Saudi tribesmen.

However that may be, the events of 1937 seem to have led ibn Saud to two conclusions; that he would have to free himself from too great dependence on or vulnerability to Britain, and that this could only be done by bringing in Germany to provide aid and a balance against English and Italian pressure. He seems to have believed Germany to be the dominant and controlling partner in the Rome-Berlin axis. It is, of course, difficult to know how much of what followed in the Saudi approach to Berlin took place on his initiative, and how much was that of his pro-German advisers. But that he approved their proposals is shown by the part he played in 1939.

The first contact with the Germans was made in 1937 by ibn Saud's physician, Madhat Al Ard. While on a visit to complete his medical studies in Berlin he fell into the hands of the Nazi Party foreign relations office, the A.P.A., always on the look out for a chance to compete with the professional diplomats of the German Foreign Ministry. He led them to open the question of Saudi arms purchases in Germany, and succeeded in giving them the impression that the Amir Feisal would visit Berlin the following year. There were certain other contacts, impossible to assess, between other Saudis and the Abwehr, the German (but not Nazi) Secret

Service. Formal contact was opened, presumably as a result of Al Ard's report, by Yusuf Yasin in November. While on a visit to Baghdad he called on Grobba, the German minister in Iraq, the only German diplomat of standing accredited to an Arab capital, and, in the course of a conversation mainly devoted to an attempt to enlist German support for the Palestinian Arabs, intimated that ibn Saud would very much welcome the accrediting of a German diplomatic representative to Jiddah. On January 1, 1938, he repeated this intimation in a letter to Grobba communicating the Saudi intention of settling its debt to De Haas, and announcing the forthcoming visit of De Haas' former partner, Al Qarqani, to Germany to buy arms.

This visit was not a success. Al Qarqani found himself unwittingly involved in a major dispute between the A.P.A. and the German Foreign Ministry, and the fact that his preliminary contacts were with the A.P.A. did not predispose von Hentig, head of the Middle Eastern division of the Foreign Ministry, in his favour. Although the A.P.A. put him in touch with Ferrostaal, a large German arms firm whose headquarters were at Cologne, his request for arms, an ammunition factory to be installed in Saudi Arabia and a loan to finance this fell on deaf ears. Germany was in fact desperately short of foreign currency at this period, and the Ministry of Economics refused to authorize delivery on credit. Ibn Saud wisely refused the A.P.A.'s invitation to the Amir Saud to attend the Nuremberg rally unless this was extended by an official German representative. Desultory negotiations with Ferrostaal continued.

Relations with Britain, however, continued to deteriorate. In March 1938, it is true, the Earl and Countess of Athlone visited Riyadh and renewed vows of friendship between Britain and Saudi Arabia were exchanged. The Germans were led to believe that promises of British assistance in the development of the Saudi army had been made to ibn Saud. The Anglo-Italian agreement of April 1938 must have come as a rude shock to him. Hitherto he had relied on the hostility between the two powers to maintain his position. Now the two enemies pledged themselves "not to acquire a privileged position of a political character in Saudi Arabia and the Yemen" and to prevent other countries from doing so. Ibn Saud took the conclusion of the Agreement as a personal affront, in that it seemed to claim a joint Anglo-Italian protectorate over his country. He protested bitterly, and on the ratification of the Agreement issued a public statement refusing to recognize its validity.

The discovery that Italy did not propose to observe the terms of the Agreement too carefully must have been a considerable relief, therefore. Italian pressure on him to buy arms from Italy seems to have been strong throughout 1937-38. In August Fuad Bey Hamza visited both Rome and Berlin. He told von Hentig of the German Foreign Ministry that Mussolini had personally made him very extensive and reassuring statements and "was prepared to furnish proof of his friendly sentiments, if not in Palestine, then directly in Saudi Arabia." This "proof" ("arms shipments," noted Hentig drily), ibn Saud had consistently resisted. Silitti, the Italian Minister in Jiddah, put this in a rather different light when he told Grobba that the Italians had sent ibn Saud six aircraft, ten pieces of artillery, had

trained six Saudi pilots gratis in Italy and had induced him to accept a military mission consisting of a lieutenant-colonel and some mechanics to continue that training on Saudi Arabian soil. The Italian State-subsidized firm "Sana" was apparently engaged on arms negotiations in Jiddah throughout the first six months of 1939. Its services were offered to the Germans when it became obvious that ibn Saud would not play.

This Italian pressure was no doubt very useful to ibn Saud. His resistance to Italian wiles and lures no doubt was made much of in conversations with British representatives. The generosity of the Italians was equally made much of in the continuing negotiations with Ferrostaal, the German arms firm. Of course, Ferrostaal were assured of the Saudi's preference for German arms. Yet the Italian arms offers were so much more generous. Both Italy and Germany were assured of ibn Saud's need for their assistance to free his country from British pressure, and to fortify his tribesmen against British subversion. The tortuous diplomacy of the Arab potentate and his servants could not have enjoyed more favourable conditions. Hamza made a considerably better impression on the German Foreign Ministry than had Al Qarqani. Hentig put him in touch with the Abwehr and a shipment of arms was assembled to be delivered to Saudi Arabia, partly for ibn Saud and partly for onward transmission to Palestine. The delivery was held up because, according to the German record, "absolutely certain information was received that Hamza was in British pay." There seems to have been some intrigue at foot here. One can guess at competition between Yasin and Qarqani on one hand and Hamza on the other, the more so when one finds Yasin warning Grobba against discussing aid to Palestine or arms deliveries to Saudi Arabia with Hamza, hinting broadly that he had been misappropriating funds earmarked for aid to Palestine. Al Qarqani himself was probably most interested in securing a commission from Ferrostaal, and angled at one time to act as their Middle Eastern agent.

In January 1939 ibn Saud's main aim was achieved when Germany opened formal diplomatic relations and Grobba was treated to an impassioned résumé of British actions against Arab interests in general and Saudi Arabia in particular, in the Hadramaut and in Oman. British assurances, so Grobba reported ibn Saud as saying, he regarded as lies. Britain's real aim was to establish her rule over all Arab lands and bring them under her subjection. His aim in view of this was to free himself as much as possible from British influence in as unostentatious a manner as possible, so long as he was not in a position to check the excessive influence of Britain in the Arab world. He asked Grobba for diplomatic support, economic aid to develop Saudi Arabia's domestic economy, and arms at as low a price as possible. In return he promised benevolent neutrality in the event of war. Among the items of specifically Saudi Arabian interest for which German diplomatic support was asked were Saudi claims on Aqaba and Ma'ah in the north and "Nadjra" (presumably Nejran north of Shabwa), in the south. German support was also asked for Arab arms in Palestine. These remarks were echoed and elaborated upon by Yusuf Yasin. Germany was also asked to restrain her ally, Italy, from pressure on the Yemen, a difficult task for Germany to fulfil as there seems to have

been some kind of German-Italian understanding as to the Yemen being within the Italian sphere of influence.

This contact with Germany, and other contacts, to be mentioned later with the United States and Japan seem to have enabled ibn Saud to feel free of the Anglo-Italian nutcrackers in which formerly he believed himself to be caught. In February 1939 he dismissed the Italian air training mission, and revealed to Grobba that he had been secretly subsidizing the Arab rebels in Palestine. Shortly thereafter he dispatched Al Qarqani to Germany with a personal letter to Hitler asking for the latter's support for Al Qarqani's mission and assuring him "that it is our foremost aim to see the friendly and intimate relations with the German Reich developed to the utmost limits." Al Qarqani's mission, it was to emerge, was to ask for a delivery of 8,000 rifles, 8 million rounds of small arms ammunition, and a credit of six million Reichsmark. In addition he was to ask for light anti-aircraft guns, armoured cars and machinery for the manufacture of small-arms ammunition.

Al Qarqani was received both by Ribbentrop and by Hitler in June 1939 at the Obersalzberg. The discussion took place at a high level of historical mistiness, but Al Qarqani succeeded in getting German agreement to all his demands, and the mission was a success, despite an outburst of publicity which led ibn Saud to threaten to break off negotiations. The arms agreement was signed on July 18, 1939, and a further 4,000 rifles were to be given to ibn Saud as a present from the German nation. The rifles never in fact reached him and no orders were placed by any Saudi representative before the German attack on Poland on September 1, 1939. The British declaration of war on Germany and the imposition of the blockade made any subsequent delivery of arms more or less impossible. The Saudi authorities thought it as well to ask Grobba through the Italians not to visit Saudi Arabia in January 1940, so as not to place them in difficulties with the British.

It has been suggested that ibn Saud's aim in the long drawn-out negotiations with Germany was not merely the acquisition of arms but also the establishment of contact with a nation that would restrain Italy and could be used as a counterpoise to Britain. If this interpretation is correct (and if he had only needed arms he could have had what he wanted from Italy), he was already beginning to find other sources of diplomatic support which could strengthen his position *vis-à-vis* Britain. One hardly knows what to make of the much publicized visit of the Japanese minister in Cairo to Jiddah in May 1939, except to say that the widely spread and believed stories of Japanese interest in Saudi oil seem somewhat unlikely, and are based mainly on American sources. The Japanese decision to accredit one of their few diplomats in the Middle East to Jiddah as well as to Cairo seems merely to have been an imitation of the example set by Germany. The American decision to open diplomatic relations, though also inspired by routine considerations such as the number of Americans working in Saudi Arabia, etc., was from the Saudi point of view a very different matter.

We have already noted one instance by ibn Saud of diplomatic pressure through the Californian-Arabian Oil Company on the American State De-

partment. In November 1938 ibn Saud had addressed a lengthy statement of the Arab position in Palestine to President Roosevelt. In June 1939 the Californian-Arabian Oil Company representative, Mr. Lenahan, reported ibn Saud as saying that the Japanese and the British were offering him larger sums than they, and for smaller concessions, but that he had faith in the United States and was satisfied with and trusted the Americans. These statements reported by the American Minister in Cairo sufficiently impressed the U.S. Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, for him to include them in his memorandum to President Roosevelt recommending the opening of relations. With the dispatch of an American mission, ibn Saud had at last a powerful and persistent counter-balance to Britain, and was able to play easily on the fears and suspicions of the American oil companies.

To conclude: politically and militarily ibn Saud's position was weak. Yet once he had realized the strategic advantages conferred on him by his position both geographically, in that Saudi Arabia lay athwart both the Red Sea and Persian Gulf routes from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, and in his possession of oil resources which lay outside the area of British control, he made extremely effective use of them, to become the dispenser rather than the suppliant for friendship. In the period before 1939, inevitably his main aim was to diminish the degree to which he was vulnerable to British pressure. There is no real reason to doubt the sincerity of his remarks to Grobba as to his fears of Britain, even if it is plain that his professional advisers from the fringes of the Levantine Arab nationalist movement were much more convinced Anglophobes than he. In addition to his general feeling of insecurity *vis-à-vis* his more powerful British neighbour, British action in Palestine left him eventually no choice but to align himself with the general trend of Arab opinion, especially in view of the support given to the Arab rising in Palestine by his Hashemite rivals. His negotiations with the Germans, his revelation that he was secretly contributing to the Arab revolt's war-chest, above all his agreement to part of the arms he was negotiating to purchase in Germany being delivered to the Arab rebels, are clearly actions which, had they come to British attention, this country would have been forced to regard as unfriendly. Towards the Italian government, whose support of things Arab was revealed by their signature of the Anglo-Italian Agreement to be purely tactical, he remained most cautious. He took limited supplies of arms and military aid from them in 1938, and he several times expressed to the Italian Minister in Jiddah his satisfaction at Italian diplomatic support. But their continuing activities in the Yemen alone were enough to cause him to retain a basic ineradicable suspicion of their motives. In his approach to Germany it seems clear the pace was made by his advisers who were misled (and misled him) by the Nazi propaganda against things Jewish and against Britain into expecting far more immediate support than they were at first to obtain. The main motive behind the German change of position towards Saudi Arabia in 1939 appears to have been the need to find a new home in the Middle East for Grobba in the event of his expulsion from Iraq, and the hope perhaps of using this as a base for subversive activities against the British position in the Middle East, once the onset of war seemed inevitable. The disparity between Saudi hopes and the Ger-

man promises, which amounted to little more than a minor arms deal, reveal how greatly ibn Saud's advisers misjudged the position.

This misjudgment perhaps underlay the comparative eclipse of Saudi Arabian influence and status among the Arab States in the period after 1936. Ultimately this eclipse was to Saudi Arabia's benefit. She emerged from the war rich, her country unoccupied, her government stable, her ruler's reputation enhanced, where most other Arab States were to undergo British occupation, *coups d'état* from their armed forces, and periods of what amounted more or less to dictatorship. Undoubtedly, the main factor in this was ibn Saud's great appreciation of the limits of German activity and the ease and ruthlessness with which British force could be brought to bear on him. He seems to have been unique among Arab political leaders in his understanding of the balance of power in the Middle East. In the long run, his misjudgment of Germany was of little harm to Saudi Arabia or her ruler's interests. It prevented him from falling into the trap into which Rashid Ali or the Mufti of Jerusalem fell, of identifying Nazi interests with their own, an error which in the Mufti's case greatly weakened the Arab stand on Palestine after 1945. But in the short run, the touchstone of Arab statesmanship in Arab eyes was Palestine. And here ibn Saud's own anxieties forced him to take a back seat. His admissions on the subject to Dickson and to Grobba show that he appreciated and resented this. One is left with the question on which the German evidence throws some light, as does Dickson's: the question of ibn Saud's motives. What led him to support the Arab rebels in Palestine, but only in secret? What led him to approach Germany for arms, yet threaten to break the contract off, when it became a motive for public discussion? What led him to ask for German support for the Arab independence in Syria, in Iraq and in the Yemen? One is reduced to speculation.

The course of the negotiations suggest that ibn Saud was concerned with two rather different things—his standing in the eyes of other Arab governments and his standing with his own tribesmen and family. The key to the first lay with the Grand Mufti. While ibn Saud was supporting him with arms and money, even if this was secret, ibn Saud was not likely to become the target of Arab governmental hostility. Similar considerations, no doubt, would apply to his family. Where his tribesmen and the townsfolk of Mecca, Medina and Jedda are concerned, his public pronouncements, the letter to Roosevelt, the diplomatic protests published in the Mecca Press, and the interviews published abroad would seem to prove his Arabism on the subject of Palestine. The rifles, the light artillery, the armoured cars, and above all the ammunition factory would give him the means of assuring loyalty of the tribesmen. To control these as successfully as ibn Saud did in his rise to power was no bad training for the complexities of international diplomacy which he faced when he had achieved power.