

FROM RELIGIOUS MILITANCY TO *REALPOLITIK*: SAUDI ARABIA UP TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Abstract. *The study aims to offer an analysis of the early history of the modern Saudi state, up until the Second World War. This interval of Saudi state-building is hallmarked by a double dimension: a militancy, an expression especially of the Wahhabi environments and the Ikhwan's military brigades, which were characterized by a missionary and expansionist vocation, and by the political realism and diplomatic intelligence of the Saudi sovereign 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Saud, who knew how to use the rivalries between the regional and international powers in order to maintain the independence of the new state, to expand it to its maximum limits and especially to assure a gradual development, based on oil cooperation with the United States.*

Keywords: *Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism, Ibn Saud, Islam, Middle East, Realpolitik, Great Britain.*

Since its re-appearance at the beginning of the 20th century, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had a singular position in the political history of the modern Middle East, a condition that it managed to keep up to the present day. Firstly, it is a state that traces its roots to a religious project, that of implementing Muslim norms in their neo-Hanbali formula, developed by the reformer Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, at the individual level, as well as at the community and political ones. Even since its formation in the 18th century, based on a collaboration between the Wahhabi theological elites and the Saudi political leaders, the kingdom managed to convert the multiple tribal loyalties of the region and to dilute the differences among its heterogeneous provinces, towards a project that envisaged the re-establishment of the original model of the Muslim state from the first years of Islam. This religious momentum especially hallmarked the first decades of the new Saudi state, rebuilt by 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Saud at the start of the 20th century, and was assumed especially by the militant brigades of the *Ikhwān*, through which the territorial expansion was realised, starting from Nejd.

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On the other side, because of its difficult geographic position and the fact that in the époque it was devoid of economical or strategic stakes, the Saudi state remained outside the European colonial interests and, at the same time not being part of Ottoman Empire, it did not find itself in the project of the partitioning of its Arabic provinces after the First World War.

Thus, the emirate and then the Saudi Kingdom kept an almost singular independence in the époque, one that it knew how to keep through assuming an extremely realistic and ideologically unconditioned external policy, capitalizing on the Inter-War rivalries between the great powers, Great Britain, Nazi Germany, USSR and the United States, all interested by the exercise of an ever greater influence in the Middle East, especially because of the energy resources discovered there.

As a consequence, the first decades of Saudi Arabia's existence, that coincide with the period of 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Saud's reign, were characterised by a complicated dialectic between the utopian temptation of remaining faithful to the political-religious original Wahhabi project, pleading for an ever more extended territorial and ideological expansion of the Saudi state and model, and assuming a conscious *realpolitik*, based on the defence of the national interest (and that of the power elites), depending on the rapports of power in the region and at an international level. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Saud's unique ability was exactly one that reconciled the two tendencies, not fairly easy at times, and to gradually construct an ever more functional state, whose special collaboration with the United States assured its security, the preservation of its own political system and the exploitation and massive financial capitalisation on its petroleum resources after the Second World War.

The Origins of a Political-Religious Alliance: Wahhābism and the House of Saud

Structurally, the Saudi state has an ideological-religious fundament, still being an expression of a phenomenon specific to the history of Islam, that of constituting a political entity resulted from the actions of reformers or charismatic figures. In the case of the Saudi state, its history begins with the moment when a theologian that was touched by the vocation of rebuilding the true Muslim values met the one who defended and implemented this moral and political reforming project. 'Abd al-Wahhāb was born in 1703 in an oasis of the Nejd province, in the centre of the Arabian Peninsula. According to the tradition of the époque, he made several study voyages to Medina, where he came to know Ibn Taymiyya's teaching from a Hanbali theologian, then to Basra, Bagdad, Hamadan, Isfahan, Qom, Cairo and Damascus. In 1739 he returned to Nejd, where he exposed his doctrine, especially in the work *Kitāb al-Tawhīd (The Book on Divine Unity)* and more so, he began, with the help of several tribal chiefs that became his adepts, to apply the prescriptions of his doctrine, along the line of the Hanbali rigour and puritanism: the oppression of Shi'a, destruction of the sacred trees and the graves of the saints, considered in Islam as pagan elements, etc. However, his

rigidity made him less desirable in a tribal environment characterised by an extremely flexible Islam that left an additional place to tribal heterodox traditions; driven away from his locality, 'Uyaina, al-Wahhāb left for Dar'īya, where he put himself under the protection of the region's emir, Muhammad ibn Saud. Here, in 1744, the event on which the whole internal structure of the Saudi state was based took place: a pact (*bai'a*) was concluded between Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb and Muhammad ibn Saud through which they swore reciprocal fidelity in the effort of installing an Islamic state compliant to al-Wahhāb's conception: "from this pact, which postulated itself as a Bedouin principality in a legitimately instituted theocracy, one could say that truly dates the foundation of the Wahhābi state"¹. In order to better understand the theological, social and political reforming effort of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, one must first underline his doctrinarian affiliations within Islam, like the historical context of his age, that delineate the critical rapports of Wahhābism from the other currents and its political claims comprehensive.

Sunni Islam was to be constructed, since the first years of the conformity with the Quran norms and imperatives, as the ultimate and most accomplished expression of the Divine truth (*Haqīqā*) sent to the whole humanity. The second source of inspiration was to be the Prophet, whose affirmations, acts, behaviour were compiled in that which is called *Sunna* – The Tradition. As well, after his death, the contoured state tried to keep the characteristics of the theocracy instituted by Muhammad in Medina as best as possible: its identity was not given by the tribal membership anymore but the membership of the Muslim Community (*'umma*), the adepts of the monotheist religions had the status of protected communities (*dhimmi*), the political leadership (*caliphate*) was also a religious one (*imāmate*) etc. The first decades, even though they witnessed the crumbling of the community in the great factions: Sunni, Shi'a and Kharidjites were characterised by the preoccupation of formalizing and integrally implementing the norms that had to define a Muslim community: this way the first theologian-jurists appeared, who elaborated on the *Sharī'a*. Its definitive systematization was only finished in the 9th century, after the Byzantine and Persian cultural and juridical traditions were re-thought through the prism of Islam and used to complete the Muslim code. At this time, the four juridical-theologian schools formed (*madhab*), on whose principles Sunnism is driven even nowadays: Shafi'is, Malekism, Hanafism and Hanbalism. Some were more liberal, accepting not only the Quran and the Sunna as sources of inspiration and as a theme of the decisions but also three other juridical criteria: the consensus of the community (*idjmā*), reasoning through analogy (*qiyās*) and the effort of interpreting (*ijtihād*) or the personal judgement (*ra'y*) but all were constituted through a mimetic rapport to the époque of Quran revelation, according to the principle: "We are men that follow and who not invent" (*Ahna taba'īne ou maqī bada'īne*)². From all these, the rite established by Ibn Hanbal (780-855) was the most traditional and opposed to the foreign

¹ Laoust Henry, *Les schismes dans l'Islam*, Payot, 1964, p. 322.

² Charles Raymond, *Le droit musulman*, Presses Universitaires de France 1982, p. 6.

influences in the Quran tradition: he only accepts the Quran and Sunna as a fundament of religious and community life. Hanbali had a great influence over the Abbasid caliphate in the 10th-11th centuries but gradually, as the Turkic peoples' ascension to power (Seljuk, then Mongols, Ottomans) it was replaced by Shafi'i and especially Hanafi – which became the official rite of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. Hanbalism only survived in certain theological schools, its political rigidity making it less liked by Muslim leaders. However, at the start of the 14th Century, that which was called “Neo-Hanbali” appeared, especially represented by Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) and his disciples that, within Egypt's Mamluke sultanate, once again preached the necessity of reverting to the sacred texts and eliminating all other additions from *Shari'a* which were not based on the Quran and Sunna, thus being the expression of human judgement that was exercised concurrently or against the Divine directives. He criticised both the rationalist theology and Sufism and preached a “middle ground” (*wasat*), without rational excesses and excessive pietism or the spiritual hermeneutic specific to Sufis³. Living in a critical moment of the history of Islam, when the Mongol invasions destroyed the Abbasid caliphate and when the caliph institution had become a simple title worn by an Abbasid descendant in Cairo, devoid of any effective authority, Ibn Taymiyya offered a set of solutions that pursued a partial recovery of the tragedy suffered by the *'umma*. Namely, the return to “the old” (*salaf*), relinquishing all the philosophical, mystical, cultural innovations that were foreign to the Quran and Sunna and that have weakened the community, making it fall under the rule of the Mongol pagans; in the political plane, the establishment of an Islamic state, not necessarily a caliphate but one that would be organized and lead by the principles of *Shari'a*. The thesis of the master, killed in prison because of his reforming enthusiasm, was to be continued and developed by his main disciple Ibn al-Qaiyim.

This was the line which Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb tried to follow when he began to preach the return of the Muslims to the norms of faith and behaviour from Muhammad's time, in the Arabic Peninsula. Wahhābism had, since the beginning, a double dimension: one of religious reformation of the Muslim world and a political dimension, pursuing the establishment of a state, of a political power in conformity with the *Shari'a* and that would watch over the abidance of the religious prescriptions. The predicted project was to build an authentic Sunni state, on the background of the gradual fall of the Ottoman Empire – for that matter, considered as illegitimate and of the structural rivalry with the Shi'a Persian state. As a consequence, al-Wahhāb's group entered a logic of combativeness since the beginning, including a military one, not just doctrinarian, firstly regarding the Shi'a and Kharidjites and also with the Sunni orientations accused of “blameable innovation” (*bid'a*): the dogmatic rationalist theology (*kalām*), philosophy, Sufism and generally all the schools of thought that drifted away from the Hanbali norms⁴.

³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhaj al-Sunna*, in H. Laoust, *Les schismes dans l'Islam*, p. 272.

⁴ Natana DeLong-Bas, *Wahhābi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 4-5.

From al-Wahhāb's important thesis, as they were exposed in his works, one would especially remark the accent posed on the oneness of the Divine (tawhīd), which had to be in the centre of the faith and of the life of every Muslim. Tawhīd is the very essence of the Islamic doctrine but the Wahhābi, as their precursors, the Almohads, considered themselves "the intransigent champions of the Divine oneness"⁵, calling themselves "Unitarianists" (al-muwahhidūn). This resulted in an absolute imperative of directing the religious effort exclusively on divinity. There was no inter-agent between the faithful and Allah: the absolute monotheism therefore excluded the cult of saints, divination practices, Shi'ism's idea of Imam etc.; at the same time, even using the name of a prophet, saint or angel in the prayer was branded as polytheism (shirq). Anyone who was an adept of a doctrine that did not base itself on the Quran and the Sunna was culpable of the sin of unfaithfulness (kufr), the same as the one that tried to surpass the purely literal understanding of the Quran, through a symbolic or allegoric exegesis. Puritan by excellence, al-Wahhāb strongly rejected the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, the dance and music; he demanded the return to the old Sharī'a traditions: the absolute obligation of respecting the prescribed norms of faith and behaviour, the application of corporal punishments as they were in the "times of old" (salaf)⁶. Such an extremely simplified variant of Islam had receptivity in the old Bedouin tribes of Central Arabia, which remained outside Islam's cultural history and were still adepts of the old tribal customs, close to the ritual Islam proposed by al-Wahhāb.

The Dar'īya Pact was strengthened through a matrimonial alliance: the wedding of Muhammad ibn Saud's son to one of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's daughters, the first marriage of a long series, that continued even nowadays between the Saud and al-Shaykh (descendants of Sheikh al-Wahhāb) houses. Religion was once again put in the service of military enthusiasm, assuming the model of the Prophet's fight against the unbelievers. Thus, Ibn Saud succeeded in conquering a great part of Nejd, up to his death in 1765 and his son, 'Abd al-'Azīz continued the expansion, still counselled by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb: in 1773 Riyadh was occupied and they reached the Gulf of Persia (in 1792 the Ottoman province Hassa was occupied, populated by Shi'a tribes and in 1797 the Qatar Peninsula and Bahrain Archipelagos entered under Saudi authority). On the 21st of April 1802 the Wahhābi attack the holy Shi'a town of Karbala, South of Iraq, destroying the mausoleum of Imam Husayn, the Prophet's nephew, which caused a great perturbation in the Shi'a world and provoked the elevation of tensions between Persia and the Ottomans. In November 1803, 'Abd al-'Azīz was killed by a Shi'a but was replaced by his son, Saud ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. Al-Wahhāb had died beforehand, in 1792 but he left behind several sons and disciples that continued to enforce his doctrine, in collaboration with the Saudi power. Once with Saud ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, the first Saudi state reached its territorial culmination, once with the Hedjaz campaign when Taif (1802), Mecca (1803) and Medina (1804) were

⁵ H. Laoust, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

⁶ Jamaal al-Din M. Zarabozo, *The Life, Teachings and Influence of Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhaab*, The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Dawah and Guidance The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2003.

gradually occupied, the Ottoman army suffered a great defeat and Mesopotamia and even the Syrian Ottoman provinces were once again threatened, while in the Gulf there were clashes with the English fleet⁷.

However, the hegemonic ambitions of the Wahhābis, who were also rejected theologically by the majority of the Muslim ulema, already worried the Ottomans. In 1811, the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud the IInd asked Muhammad 'Ali Pasha, Egypt's viceroy, to destroy the new Arab power. Notwithstanding, the Ottoman troops only managed to drive the Wahhābis out of Hedjaz in 1813 and in 1816 they entered Nejd. The Wahhābi state was led by 'Abdallah ibn Saud, who succeeded his father after he died in 1814. In April 1818, defeated by the Ottomans in the Dar'iya oasis, he was captured and sent to Istanbul, where he was decapitated; the event marked the end of the first Saudi-Wahhābi political structure.

Nevertheless, in 1821 a second Saudi state appeared, under the mobilising efforts of Turki ibn Abdallah al-Saud one of 'Abdallah's cousins, who escaped the Dar'iya massacre. He reconstructed the emirate on the same theological principles, around the capital Riyadh and in 1824 he brought the whole Nejd under his leadership, while the Turks remained in Hedjaz. Killed in 1834, Turki was followed by his son, Faysal but there were several dynastic misunderstandings, fuelled by the Ottomans. The kingdom was stable once more under Faysal's (1843-1866) second reign, when he all the same admitted Ottoman suzerainty but then a series of factors led to his collapse: the disputes among his sons, the Ottoman actions from Iraq and especially the raised influence of Banu Rashid clan, of the great confederation of Shammār tribes, that populated the North-East of the Peninsula. In 1884, his troops, led by Muhammad ibn Rashid occupied the Nejd with Ottoman help, ending the second Saudi state. The Saudi princes, spearheaded by 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Faysal took refuge in the neighbouring emirate, Kuwait.

The two Saudi states were political structures based on a mix of two types of identities and mobilizations: one originating from the religious message that pleaded for a reform of the private, social and political norms and the other one centred on the perpetuation of the tribal links which became a factor of cohesion and accrued militancy. This double *assabiyya*, ideological and tribal, defined the structure of power and its mechanisms of legitimacy to the present day, although in the modern period it refined its institutional manifestations. As a theocratic state, the power was partitioned between its two instances, the Wahhābi *ulemas* taking up the right to watch over the control of the purity of the population's behaviour (according to the Quran principle which became a ministry of the very Saudi state: The Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) while the Saudi clan assumed the governing tasks and also the militant split image of the Wahhābi reforming momentum. This proto-history of the Saudi kingdom is little known and the historical sources few and often tributary to the official Ottoman perspective of the époque which regarded the Wahhābi phenomenon more like a form of doctrinarian heresy doubled by an undesirable political independency. The occupation

⁷ Louis De Corancez, *The History of the Wahabis from their Origin until the End of 1809*, Ithaca Press, 1995, p. 24.

of the holy places and the anti-Shi'a raids which affected the fragile status-quo between the Ottomans and the Qajars of Persia especially contained an important weight of destabilisation on the background of the gradual decay of the Ottoman state. Although a peripheral region of the Empire, The Arabian Peninsula (especially the Hedjaz province) still remained an essential stake especially from a symbolic point of view, as the space of the apparition of Islam and of the cities linked to the holy history but also as a traditional transit area between Yemen and the Syrian provinces of the Empire. More than that, the rising presence of the European powers in the Persian Gulf and Aden, spearheaded by Great Britain made Arabia a geostrategic goal, if not an essential one at least one with an ever more elevated significance. Also, more important than all, the Saudis' ambitions of political independence and territorial expansion were contemporary with those of the Egyptian pasha Muhammad Ali. On the background of the ever more obsessive preoccupation towards the preservation of the Empire's unity, they became a perilous precedent that could have reproduced itself in other provinces; furthermore, the *vilayets* (provinces) of Basra and Bagdad were in the same period under the Mamluke dynasty, which was administratively autonomous in rapport with the central power. At the start of the 19th century, one of the vital strategic desiderata of the Ottoman leaders was exactly the re-establishment of the Gate's authority over these provinces with centrifugal tendencies.

The Formation of the Modern Saudi Kingdom

The third Saudi state, which continues up until the present, began its history in 1902, when emir 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Saud (born in 1879 – traditionally also designated under the simplified name Ibn Saud), son of 'Abd al-Rahman, occupied the Riyadh oasis leading only forty adepts, chasing away the governor installed by Ibn Rashid. From here, he succeeded to reconquer the whole Nejd until 1906. Starting from 1910, in order to subsume and discipline his Bedouins, he organised military-agrarian colonies (*houjar*) around oasis and water wells, centres of religious, economic and military life, according with the Wahhābi provisions, because “as Ibn Khaldun had magisterially shown centuries earlier, the only means to unite the Bedouins fitted with an anarchic temperament is to gather them around a religious message”⁸. The purpose of these *houjar* was a double one: on one side the discipline and sedentism of the Bedouin tribes and on the other the exchange of the old tribal links, often times a source of indissoluble conflicts and dissensions, with a new type of fidelity, based on the conscience of a religious fraternity; this being the reason why they were called “Brothers” (*Ikhwān*)⁹. Together with the *Ikhwāns*, powerfully motivated by a religious momentum, imitating the old campaigns of the Prophet and the first caliphs, 'Abd al-'Aziz set to reconquer the Peninsula on the background of the weakening of the Ottoman power: in

⁸ Laurens Henry, *L'Orient arabe: arabisme et islamisme de 1798-1945*, Armand Colin, 2000, p. 129.

⁹ Joseph Kostiner, “On Instruments and Their Designers: The Ikhwan of Najd and the Emergence of the Saudi State”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1985, pp. 298-323.

1913 the Hassa province, on the shores of the Gulf, then in 1920 the provinces Abha and Asir, near Yemen. In 1921, 'Abd al-'Aziz attacked Hail and al-Jouf, the centres of clan Rashid, which he occupied in November; from now on, the whole Shammār territory was integrated in the Saudi kingdom and Ibn Saud proclaimed himself Sultan of the Nejd¹⁰.

At the moment of the First World War, Ibn Saud assumed neutrality: after many negotiations during the whole year, on the 26th of December 1915 a treaty was perfected with Great Britain, in which he committed himself to not enter in relations with other powers without British consent and to respect the territories under British protection – it was exactly what he also wished, especially as he received subventions and weapons for his attitude¹¹. At the end of the war, the situation in the Arab Peninsula was still sufficiently confuse: the centre was under Saudi rule, in the area of the British had penetrated the Gulf even since the end of the 19th Century (Kuwait – 1899, Oman – 1891, The Coast of Pirates – 1892, Qatar – 1861) and the same in Hadramaut (South Yemen) in 1882. The Hedjaz province, which sheltered the holy lands, was governed since the medieval period by the Hashemite sheriffs of Mecca. In the First World War, Sheriff Hussein participated on behalf of the British, provoking the anti-Ottoman Arabic revolt lead by his sons Faysal and Abdallah, counselled by Colonel Lawrence¹². At the end of the war, Hussein expected his former allies to announce the forming of a great pan-Arabic kingdom in the Fertile Crescent and the Peninsula but England and France applied the old secret Sykes-Picot accord of 1916, which partitioned the former Arabic territory of the Ottoman Empire in new states, following a Western model. All that the Hashemite family received was the appointing of Faysal as King of Iraq and of Abdallah as emir of Transjordan; the first being an ethnically and religiously composite state which was in a permanent state of tension and the second a region poor in resources with a Bedouin majority of population. Hussein remained governor of Hedjaz and even proclaimed himself caliph in 1924, after Atatürk had abolished the Ottoman caliphate but the sheriff's decision was powerfully contested in the Muslim world. More so, it irritated the old British allies who, considering themselves acquitted by their duty to the Hashemite family, increasingly favoured the new Saudi power, which benefitted by a rising lobby in London, through Henry Saint-John Philby, Ibn Saud's "Lawrence", "the greatest explorer of Arabia" as his son, Kim Philby, wrote on his tomb¹³.

Thus, in 1924, Mecca and Medina were conquered by the *Ikhwāns* and Hussein was banished: "The control of the holy places offered the Wahhābi state the international legitimacy it still lacked in the 'Umma, the community of the faithful"¹⁴. Cautiously, 'Abd al-'Aziz did not designate himself caliph and did not even try

¹⁰ Benoist-Méchin, *Ibn-Seoud ou la naissance d'un royaume*, Editions Complexe, 1991, pp. 161 – 217.

¹¹ Jacob Goldberg, "The Origins of British-Saudi Relations: The 1915 Anglo-Saudi Treaty Revisited", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1985, p. 693-703.

¹² Gary Troeller, "Ibn Sa'ud and Sharif Husain: A Comparison in Importance in the Early Years of the First World War", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1971, p. 627-633.

¹³ Elisabeth Monroe, *Philby of Arabia*, Ithaca Press, 1998.

¹⁴ Da Lage Olivier, *Géopolitique de l'Arabie Saoudite*, Editions Complexe, 1996, p. 36.

to construct his genealogy to Muhammad, as was often the case in the Islamic world, procedure through which, for instance, the Hashemites or the King of Morocco gained legitimacy. He proclaimed himself King of Hedjaz, also keeping the title of Sultan of the Nejd, titles recognised by Great Britain, France, and The Soviet Union.

Immediately after occupying the sacred places, the *Ikhwāns* applied the Wahhābi principles: destroying the mausoleums of the saints and the graves of the Prophet's companions, changing some centuries old religious customs of the pilgrimage, considered from then on as pagan. The King's external diplomacy, which brought him international acknowledgement, was not understood and accepted by the religious leaders, who continually preached the Wahhābi expansion to the rest of the Islamic world; in 1928 a series of raids made by the *Ikhwāns* in Transjordan and Kuwait, without the knowledge of Ibn Saud, proved disastrous because of the intervention of British troops. The leaders of the Brothers even began to intensely criticise the King, accused of betraying the Islamic cause and of making an alliance with the unfaithful powers – a situation which re-occurred after decades when after the Gulf war, the Saudi power was contested on the same basis by the radical Islamists. In 1929, the *Ikhwāns* openly rebelled but were defeated in the battle of Sabilah, when 'Abd al-'Aziz was helped by the British Air force from Kuwait¹⁵. From this moment onwards, the brotherhood was abolished because the wishes of the King were to first and foremost assure an internal cohesion within a fragile state with a heterogeneous and majority Bedouin population whose' fidelity would have had to be converted from a relation of tribal obedience to one of obedience towards the state.

Another problem, which still exists in a certain measure to the present day, was that of the administrative and security managements of a huge territory with an extremely difficult geography but especially with a heterogeneous and fragmented mental and historical structure, according to the numerous tribal identities, ferociously faithful to their own set of community representations and customary traditions. Firstly, there were great differences between the different regions of the kingdom: especially between Hedjaz, cosmopolitan and with a superior Islamic culture and the centre regions, populated with nomads that were adepts of older and obsolete tribal customs, who were the supporters of a rigid and sketched form of Islam, all these having less in common with the historical tradition of the Muslim world. In order to facilitate the integration of the Hedjaz and in order to attenuate the reticence of the local elites, Ibn Saud chose to keep the traditional legislation of the province and the former local council of leadership, formed by the great notables and merchants as it was in the Hashemite period, without imposing the juridical norms of the Wahhābi school. The Saudi sovereign attracted the traditional guilds of the great traders and merchants of Mecca and Medina on his side, joined by those of Jeddah, a Red Sea port that harbours an important oligarchy developed around sea trade¹⁶. For that matter, precisely as a

¹⁵ Basbours Antoine, *L'Arabie Saoudite en question*, Perrin, 2002, p. 72.

¹⁶ Kostiner Joseph, *The Making of Saudi Arabia, 1916-1936: From Chieftancy to Monarchical State*, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 100-117.

consequence of one of their petitions, made in the purpose of creating a unified space destined to commercial trade, 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Saud proclaimed, on the 18th of September 1932 the unity of all his occupied territories in a unique kingdom, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. However, his son, Faysal was named governor of the region, having the role of assuring the preservation of the Saudi political authority and to block the eventual attempts of secession; building up his biography of great negotiator open to diplomatic options, he ruled in close council with the Hedjaz leaders. Following this model, Ibn Saud applied a first administrative structure of the kingdom, where its historical provinces were designated with geographic denominations and he applied a model of delegation of power for the first time, power which was up until that point absolutely his, through the governors which he appointed who were, in reality, members of the clan or close clients. Prince Saud ibn al-Aziz became Viceroy of Nejd, the Jalwi family governed the Hassa province and the al Sudairi family was in charge of the Asir region, at the border with Yemen.

Then, there were also differences between the different tribal groups, whose imaginary and traditions were influenced by old reciprocal disputes, which 'Abd al-'Aziz the same as Muhammad, knew at a certain moment how to direct them towards a superior purpose: "the relation between them (the tribal leaders) and 'Abd al-'Aziz was one of mutual dependency. In return for some subsidies granted from the public thesaurus and the acknowledgement by 'Abd al-'Aziz of their administrative authority within their space of influence, the tribal leaders assured the security and maintained the political fidelity of a significant part of the population"¹⁷. Now, once with the limitation of the *Jihād's* momentum through the disbandment of the Brotherhood, 'Abd al-'Aziz looked towards gathering this heterogeneity of the Peninsula in a unitary state, subjected to the Wahhābi religious character: "Ibn Saud's religious project undergoes the Bedouin's sedentism and their progressive conversion to the means of modernity, remaining at the same time within a strict respect of the rules of Islam"¹⁸. For this, Ibn Saud "will graft the state's institutions as they appeared, on top of the tribal structures, in order to progressively operate a transfer of loyalty that would benefit the state, at the expense of the traditional authorities"¹⁹. Ibn Saud multiplied the matrimonial alliances with the main tribes; there is talk of over 150 women with whom he was successively married, from which 43 legitimate sons and an unknown number of daughters resulted. However, his authority was not unanimously accepted and there were several contestations, even from within his family – situation that characterised the Saudi power in all its subsequent history.

In the end, the Wahhābi *ulemas* assured doctrinarian uniformity on a state scale, either through their *fatwe*, which distribute a set of canonical norms with an infallible character, or through direct actions that they exercised on the population, as a result of the domination of some official instances: juridical, educational,

¹⁷ Tim Niblock, *Saudi Arabia. Power, legitimacy and survival*, Routledge, 2006, p. 26.

¹⁸ Laurens Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

¹⁹ Da Lage Olivier, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

theological systems. The state was defined as a governance in conformity with the divine law, it was somewhat of a theocracy with a double dimension: the political one, represented by the Saudi family and the theological one, represented by the theologians of the regime, especially the members of clan al-Shaykh, al-Wahhāb's descendants. According to the Wahhābi doctrine the respect of the *Sharī'a* mandatorily implies the obedience towards the sovereign (*bayah*), because the correct exercise of religion was closely linked to the existence of a legitimate political power. The regime's theologians always underlined that the best form of governance was the monarchy, because it assures the continuity of power²⁰.

In 1933, 'Abd al-'Azīz designated his son, Saud bin 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Saud as the prince inheritor, at the same time establishing the rule of succession: it was not to be the case of seniority but that of explicit designation by the king of he who would succeed him. The installation of some of the specific state structures was only made gradually, Ibn Saud ruling the kingdom in a more tribal fashion, without a fixed capital, moving his court around the vast territory of the Peninsula. Only at the end of the 40's, the capital was definitively established in Riyadh but the Saudi sovereign preferred to pass a great part of their time in the palaces constructed in Jeddah, a zone with a certainly more agreeable climate than that of the Nejd desert. Until 1953, Ibn Saud was the only decision-making authority in the state²¹, helped only by some members of his family, who exercised the functions of key ministries which only gradually appeared. These rather appear as an effect of some objective necessities of the moment and of some exogenous conditionings.

Thus, the first created ministry, the Foreign Relations one, in 1927, imposed itself as a necessary institution in order to offer an official consistency to the contacts with the other regional states or the great international powers (Great Britain, The United States, and The Society of Nations). Having Prince Faysal as a minister, the new institution was headquartered in Jeddah, on the bank of the Red Sea, a city with a traditional commercial opening towards the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean and above all an un-avoiding node of the pilgrimage routes towards the holy places. At the same time, the functionalities of the Ministry were modest and especially characterised through a lack of a coherent external policy project (that was more reactive than offensive in Abd al-Aziz's time) and qualified personnel. Faysal was, in reality, both the foreign minister, representative of the country at the meetings of the Society of Nations (then the UN) and itinerary ambassador. From more than 30 external requests of opening Saudi diplomatic agencies in different countries, the kingdom only honoured six, up until the Second World War.

²⁰ James P. Piscatori, "The Roles of Islam in Saudi Arabia's Political Development", in John Esposito (ed.), *Islam and Development: Religion and Sociopolitical Change*, Syracuse University Press, 1980, pp. 134-136.

²¹ "Jealous of his royal prerogatives, he did not hesitate to involve himself in very unimportant questions – arbitrating between individuals or tribes, drafting diplomatic dispatches, personally receiving visitors. The king did not like the ministerial organization tolerated in Hijaz. But just as exchanges with other countries required that he name a minister of foreign affairs, relations with the petroleum companies forced him to establish a ministry of finance", Ghassane Salameh, "Political Power and the Saudi State", *MERIP Reports*, No. 91 (Saudi Arabia on the Brink), 1980, p. 6.

In the same manner, the creation of a Finance Ministry in 1932 was to help manage the kingdom's financial situation, not only internally as especially in the accords with the Western powers that supported the kingdom and then help with the ever more sophisticated petroleum resource bureaucracy. Up until the start of the fifth decade, the kingdom's great problem was the lack of funds, almost all of the resources coming from pilgrimage taxes and the annual modicum sums granted by Great Britain to which the quotas were added, extremely lowered at the moment, delivered by the foreign petroleum companies to whom the kingdom's oil rich regions were leased. Furthermore, precisely as an effect of the installation of an American military base in Dhahran, with the role of protecting the ARAMCO petroleum installations, during the same year the Saudi Ministry of Defence was created. In fact, the Saudi military capabilities were almost inexistent and in any way primitive in rapport to the evolution of the military techniques and strategies. As a society, still a tribal one as social structures and behaviour patterns was concerned, the Saudi kingdom suffered by a lack of institutions and territorial infrastructure required by a modern state. In order to make up for this handicap and to compensate its lack of expertise in contracting and reaching accords with the external institutions or oil companies, 'Abd al-'Azīz put his faith in several trustworthy foreign councillors, among which the most influent and well known was John Philby. Only on the 9th of October 1932, the king published a decree that instituted a Council of Ministers that, from the point of view of Islamic legitimacy, evoked the tradition of *dīwāns* and vizirs. It was presided over by the king, who made the ultimate decisions, although prelude by talks with his specialized councillors.

Expansionist Temptations and Realistic Diplomacy

If internally, the kingdom kept its rigid Islamic discourse, based on the rejection of the Western ideas and way of life, externally "Independent Saudi Arabia has an extremely realistic external policy, founded on concrete calculations of the rapport of forces"²². This duality became the characteristic of its subsequent history of an exterior *realpolitik*, adapted as much as possible, depending on the desideratum of an internal political structure based on the alliance between a reigning dynasty and a conservative religious ideology.

Saudi Arabia had a privileged status in a Middle East that resulted following a geopolitical machination of Great Britain and France. Their decade long domination over the newly formed states had, at the same time, a political, social, juridical modernisation and destabilization role, because they motivated the emergence of some nationalist elites that maintained strained relations with the former tutelary powers and permanently tried to eliminate their local political clients. The Saudi Kingdom was spared this trauma of external control, specific to the colonial period and to the mandates, this being explained by both its lack of strategic and economic importance in the époque and by the fact that, at the moment of its

²² Laurens Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

political ascension (especially the one regarding its petroleum revelation), after the 30's, directly coincided with the acceleration of the independence processes of the Arab states, which ended after The Second World War.

As a consequence, the relations between the Saudi state and Great Britain, the power that controlled the Persian Gulf region, were bare of anguish and progressed rather from positions of collaboration, according to their own interests. At the beginning the 20th century, Central Arabia did not present a great interest to the Foreign Office strategies or those of the Indies. London had already built a security belt around the Persian Gulf and along Yemen's maritime coastline either through direct colonies or by building loyalty among the sheikhs of the small emirates; the Arabian desert, populated by nomad tribes which were in a permanent state of conflict, often incomprehensible to the Western logic, was not a curious subject, except for the great and eccentric adventurers or savants, like Gertrude Bell, whose study and evocations on the tribal configuration are among the first scientific writings about the region²³. The contracts between the Saudi and the British were actually initiated by 'Abd al-'Azīz even since 1902, from the moment of the occupation of Riyadh. He looks towards sheikh al-Sabbah as a model, his former supporter in the years of exile, who had opted for adopting a British tutelage in 1899, through which Kuwait was assured to receive a certain military protection against any Ottoman claim over the province. During these first years of the Saudi state, 'Abd al-'Azīz conceived, in his turn, the project of a pragmatic dependency on Great Britain as a favourable one that meant receiving a decisive support in the still uncertain rivalries with the contending tribes (especially those of the al-Rashid one, supported by The Gate) or in the eventuality of an anti-Saudi Ottoman offensive (which effectively takes place in 1904, without succeeding to accomplish the elimination of the Nejd emirate). Contacts with the British residents of the Gulf took place in 1903 and 1906 but London's receptivity was very limited, either because it did not see the concrete advantages of such a collaboration (a maritime power by excellence, the British geopolitical vision was centred on the control of the coastline and not of inner territories) or because, in the époque, it had a prudent attitude towards Istanbul, not wanting to interfere in a region that was of a direct interest to The Gate²⁴.

The English attitude only changed after Abd al-Aziz conquered the Hassa province, in 1913; arriving to possess they themselves an opening to the Persian Gulf, the Saudi abruptly received another statute in the British projects about the region²⁵. Percy Cox, a Gulf India Office responsible, made pressures for the

²³ *The Arabian Diaries, 1913-1914*, Syracuse University Press, 2000.

²⁴ About contacts between Ibn Saud and British and historiographical controversies about their real motivations, see Jacob Goldberg's study on epistemic veracity of the Saudi history analyzes made by John Philby: "Philby as a Source for Early Twentieth-Century Saudi History: A Critical Examination", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1985, pp. 225-227.

²⁵ Occupation of Hassa province on the western coasts of the Persian Gulf in May 1913 was one of the most loaded decisions in political and economic consequences of Abd al-Aziz. Part of the vilayet of Basra, in the 19th century, the region was firstly claimed by Sheikh al-Sabbah of Kuwait, for them to come under direct Ottoman administration. Ibn Saud's victory and the integration of the region into the new Saudi state not only offers its Gulf sea horizon and thus falls within the scope of the UK, especially brings to the kingdom itself the

inauguration of the official contacts with the Saudi Amir, although some of the British responsible remain cautious, desiring to manage the relations with The Gate: "Ibn Saud, through his intention of controlling Hassa, concretely entered the British economic and political sphere. In the measure in which Great Britain has important interests and obligations in the Gulf, it becomes impossible for the British Government to ignore Ibn Saud and to pretend to treat Hassa with political negligence. From here onwards, Great Britain was obligated to have relations and to seek a *modus vivendi* with the one that, *de facto*, exercises control over Hassa. However, such relations must not affect the British recognition of the Ottoman sovereignty over the Hassa province and its strictly neutral attitude in the Saudi-Ottoman dispute"²⁶.

At the moment of the start of the First World War, the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire became a predictable and necessary scenario for London. In their project of constructing a local allied front in the region, mobilised by the anti-Ottoman war effort, the Saudis were now seen as a desirable partner. The contacts were renewed, this time at the initiative of the English officials. Even since January 1915, the British captain Shakespeare, political officer in Kuwait, was tasked with the mission of attracting the Saudi Amir in the support of the envisaged Mesopotamian campaign: "In return of such military support, the British government received the promise of the following three assurances: (1) to protect it from an Ottoman attack or sea-born act of hostility; (2) to recognise its independence over the whole Najd and Hassa; and (3) to conclude a treaty with it"²⁷. On the 26th of December 1915, a treaty was signed but one that still had a fairly informal character, rather provisioning the limits of action of the two partners and a set of reciprocal promises. Thus, the independence of the emirate was recognised but, following the Kuwaiti model, it accepted to be represented by Great Britain in the external affairs; in exchange, this guaranteed the security of the Saudi territory against any external threats²⁸. The treaty was rather a tacit agreement of the recognition of a status-quo, because the Saudi-British alliance remained a purely theoretical one and did not have concrete application in the war effort. Prudent towards the conclusion of the war, Ibn Saud's participation to the anti-Ottoman conflict was extremely limited and was especially resumed to the blockage of the military forces of the al-Rashid tribe, allied to The Gate. At the end of 1917 and the first part of 1918, Percy Cox entrusts John Philby, a young Arabic specialist and future key figure of the modern Middle East, with several missions around Ibn Saud, in order to mobilise him for a more concrete

territory that allows changing of Saudi Arabia in the first world oil power; about context and actions that led to the occupation of the region see Jacob Goldberg, "The 1913 Saudi Occupation of Hasa Reconsidered", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1982, pp. 21-29.

²⁶ Foreign Office 371/1820, E375 Io/22076/44, citat în Jacob Goldberg, "The Origins of British-Saudi Relations: The 1915 Anglo-Saudi Treaty Revisited", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1985, pp. 693-703.

²⁷ Jacob Goldberg, "Philby as a Source for Early Twentieth-Century Saudi History: A Critical Examination", pp. 235-236.

²⁸ Daniel Silverfarb, "The Anglo-Najd Treaty of December 1915", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 1980, pp. 167-177.

offensive against the Ottoman troops, weapons and limited funds were sent to the Saudis but they remained equally reticent²⁹.

Still, after the end of the conflict and on the background of the controversies linked by the political destiny of the Arabic territories, among the multiple scenarios elaborated up until that point, the one of installing Ibn Saud as a possible sovereign of the new Iraqi state was also outlined – this was one of the options taken in account by Commissioner Percy Cox. In the moments that succeeded the Cairo conference, a meeting took place between Abd al-Aziz, Percy Cox and Gertude Bell; in the end, Churchill – as Chief of the Colonial Office, as the officials of the former Arabic Bureau and those of Mesopotamia chose to reward the Hashemite emirs, to whom the new kingdoms of Transjordan and Iraq were attributed.

The end of the war left the rivalry of the Arabic Peninsula open between the three great political-military forces that faced each other: The Saudi Emirate, the Hedjaz Hashemite clan and the tribal confederacy lead by al-Rashid. Armed confrontations came one after another after 1920, firstly hallmarked by the Saudi success over the Rashids: in August 1921 they were defeated, the capital Hail was occupied and the members of the leading clan were brought to Riyadh, to forced domicile. The Saudis occupied the territories of the tribe (Jabal Shammar), at the Northern border, near Transjordan and Iraq and the *Ikhwans* made pressures on 'Abd al-'Aziz to continue the expansion³⁰. However the British indications were beyond debate regarding any possible threat to the territory of the two new kingdoms under British mandate. The negotiations led by Perry Cox with Ibn Saud in 1922 were closed through the signing of a protocol – The Ugayr Protocol –, through which the Northern frontiers of the Saudi Emirate were established³¹. In order to council Abd al-Aziz, who invoked the nomad customs of the local tribal populations, London accepted the establishment of two “neutral areas”, at the borders of the Saudi emirate with Iraq and Kuwait. Because the tensions continued to persist, in November 1925 two new agreements were signed, in Bahra and al-Hada, reaffirming the definitive character of the frontiers between the Nejd emirate and Iraq and Transjordan; the construction of military fortifications was interdicted at the borders and the treaties imposed on the Saudi sovereign the preclusion from any religious agitation (referring to actions of proselytism or the military raids of the *Ikhwans*) in the region³².

The occupation of Hedjaz was facilitated by the British neutrality, London considering itself acquitted from now on from the Hashemite family. The appeal of Sheriff Hussein for British military support was rejected, on the background of the renewal of the military conflict with the Saudis after 1924. At the pressure

²⁹ Daniel Silverfarb, “The Philby Mission to Ibn Sa'ud, 1917-18”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1979, pp. 269-286.

³⁰ Madawi Al Rasheed, “Durable and non-durable dynasties: the Rashidis and Sa'udis in Central Arabia”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1992, pp. 144-158.

³¹ Kostiner Joseph, *The Making of Saudi Arabia...*, pp. 84-86.

³² Yitzhak Gil-Har, “Delimitation Boundaries: Trans-Jordan and Saudi Arabia”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 1992, pp. 374-384.

of the Mecca notables, Hussein was forced to abdicate on the 6th of October 1924 and to take refuge in Aqaba. His son, Ali, succeeded him but did not manage to block the Saudi military offensive which occupied Mecca in December, after a siege of several months; the next year, Medina and Jeddah were also occupied by Abd al-Aziz's troops, which thus ended the process of conquering the Hedjaz province. This was legitimised by Great Britain itself, which recognised Ibn Saud's right to control the province. In 1926, once with the development of the Saudi External Affairs Directorate (re-designated Ministry of Foreign Affairs after 1930), London officially inaugurated a contact with the kingdom, opening a diplomatic agency in Jeddah – until then, the relations between the two countries were mediated by British agents from The Gulf and Iraq areas. However, paradoxically, the first country that recognised the new kingdom of Nejd, Hassa and Hedjaz was the USSR; at the same time Holland, France and Turkey initiated diplomatic contacts³³. The relations with Persia, started in 1929 were complicated by the rivalry between Wahhābism and Shi'ism and the memory of the violent campaign of the Saudi troops against the Mesopotamian Shi'a holy centres. A religious dispute also complicated the rapports with the most important Sunni state of that moment, Egypt, this time one about the management of the Mecca pilgrimage rituals, where the Egyptians traditionally held the monopoly over several symbolic elements. In 1926, clashes between the Egyptian pilgrims and the *Ikhwan* aggravated the tension and the relations were only normalised after Ibn Saud's death, in 1956.

The gradual undertaking of an international legitimate actor, together with the implementation of the first modern state structures which offered a favourable image to the kingdom, also changed Great Britain's official position. In May 1927, a new treaty was signed between the two countries – The Jeddah Treaty, where London recognised “the absolute independence of the dominions” of the Saudi sultan in exchange of respecting the treaties and the British authority over the Gulf sheikhdoms³⁴. The new agreement represented the official confirmation of the fact that, from then on, the Saudi state entered the sphere of the regional and international relations as a full and autonomous actor; only in a few years, Ibn Saud managed to shape a subtle diplomacy, even with primitive means, through which his emirate evaded the games of the great European powers that were now, after the First World War, interested in the partitioning and control of the spheres of influence in the Middle East. Initially entered under British protection from its own initiative, in order to benefit from the same security benefits as the Gulf sheikhdoms, the Saudi state demarcated itself from the condition that still affected the former, which were directly subjected to a British influence: “Firstly, al-Saud's leadership had a greater internal authority and influence than many of the coast principalities. Secondly and in great part completing the first characteristic, the kingdom was never truly colonised. Thirdly, this de facto independence was

³³ James Wynbrandt, *A Brief History of Saudi Arabia*, Checkmark Books, p. 187.

³⁴ Daniel Silverfarb, “The Treaty of Jiddah of May 1927”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1982, pp. 276-285.

maintained with ability, opposing different external actors one against each other. And fourthly – as an example of this “game” – ‘Abd al-’Azīz was the only leader that signed a petroleum lease with non-British companies”³⁵.

Up until the start of the Second World War, the relations of the Saudi state with Great Britain were affected by prudence and reciprocal mistrust. London’s major preoccupation remained the preservation of the regional status-quo, especially the blockage of any of the Saudi Kingdom’s attempts to affect the frontiers or to influence the political order of the Gulf states, especially the sheikhdoms under British protectorate. However, the definitive elimination of the *Ikhwans* in 1928 moderated the militant aspect and nuances the ideological one of the Saudi external strategies; after the third decade, Ibn Saud adopted a *real-politik* characterised by a rational analysis of the Saudi state interests (and his personal ones), where the preoccupation of an ever more effective political independence and the search of some ever more efficient economic opportunities became the sovereign’s main centres of interest. The dissonance between the Saudi regional geopolitics and the British interest became visible even since the start of the 30’s, once with the Yemen crisis regarding the control over the Asir province.

The Asir region, situated in the Northern part of Yemen, was a fertile agricultural area, a constant subject of the rivalries between the regional powers, even since Antiquity. Under Ottoman domination since the Middle Ages, it obtained its independence at the end of the 19th century, as a consequence of the activism of some local notables, the Idrisi family, the descendants of the Sufi master Ahmad ibn Idris, who lead a tribal confederacy. Notwithstanding, the area was intensely disputed at the beginning of the 20th century by the Hashemite elites of Hedjaz and the leaders of Yemen but in the end ‘Abd al-’Azīz was the one to occupy it in 1920, as a consequence of a military campaign lead by his son, Faysal, leaving Hasan al-Idrisi as the local authority. From that moment onwards, Asir remained a subject of rivalry – doubled by successive military disputes in all the subsequent decades. In the époque, the Saudi action provoked the immediate reaction of the Yemen sovereign Imam Yahia, who in his turn had lead a Yemen unification policy, which was an extremely fragmented region, tribally and from a confessional point of view (Yahia was an Imam of the Zaydite community but a great part of the population was Sunni, of the Shafi’it rite).

The recognition by the Idrisi family of ‘Abd al-’Azīz’s authority over the province was strengthened by the signing of a treaty in 1926, through which Asir was officially declared a Saudi protectorate. However, in 1930 a second treaty was imposed by Ibn Saud, through which Hasan al-Idrisi’s prerogatives were narrowed; Asir was effectively declared a province of the Saudi Emirate. This pursuit of an ever more extended political and territorial Saudi hegemony in the Arabic Peninsula provoked a first mobilisation of ‘Abd al-’Azīz’s regional rivals. A coalition was formed between Imam Yahia, al-Idris, the former Mecca

³⁵ Gerd Nonneman, “Saudi-European Relations 1902-2001: A Pragmatic Quest for Relative Autonomy”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 3, 2001, p. 642.

notables that opposed the Saudi occupation and were in refuge in Yemen; they tried to carry out multiple actions through which to eliminate the Saudi presence from Hedjaz and Asir: a Mecca plot in 1932, a revolt of the tribes led by al-Idris in November, rapidly defeated by Ibn Saud. In 1933, a rebellion of the tribes from the South of the province was instigated and supported by Imam Yahia; he was militarily supported by both the Italians, who just make their influence felt within the region, coming from Eritrea and the British, which were in the pursuit of attenuating the Yemenite aversion towards their presence in Aden. More so, Yahia signed a treaty with Great Britain through which its security was assured; in exchange, the Saudi request to be delivered more armament was rejected by London, who tried to convince 'Abd al-'Azīz to give up on an anti-Yemenite military action. The rapture between the Saudis and the British was then certain and each of them was aware that their regional interactions were dictated by their own interests that were less and less convergent. Gradually operating its strategic mutation that came to define the politics of the Kingdom in the decades to follow, Ibn Saud used the first financial resources delivered by the newly installed *Standard Oil of California* (Socal) in order to buy armament and in March 1934 to launch an invasion in Northern Yemen, beyond the borders controlled by the Saudis in Asir³⁶. But once again, the European states with interests in the region mobilised themselves against this new breach of the regional geopolitical order: the Italian, British and French naval forces intervened against the Saudi troops and in the end the conflict was ended through the signing of the Taif peace agreement in May 1934. It now certified the definitive possession of the Asir province by the Saudi state, which in its turn retreats from the occupied Yemeni territories; however, the issue of the definitive frontiers remained in suspension and it regularly poisoned the rapports between Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

In the end, in addition to the project of building an ever more autonomous security strategy by a univocal guardian power, that would preserve the political specifics of the regime, the occupied territories and the persistency of his personal power, 'Abd al-'Azīz was more preoccupied, in the Inter Wars period, by assuring the financial security of the state – this firstly meaning his own resources. On the background of the international economic crisis from the beginning of the 30's, the pursuit of ever more numerous sources of revenue became a priority for Ibn Saud and it decisively determined the options of external politics and collaboration with the great international powers, often in a strictly pragmatic logic, beyond any ideological reticence. In 1924, Great Britain, in its turn preoccupied by the reduction of the immense spending on the states being under mandate, gave up on delivering the subsidies granted to the Saudi Emirate after 1915. In search for immediate funds in order to sustain the military campaign in Yemen but also to deliver the traditional gifts to the tribal leaders in order to keep their allegiance to the Saudi clan intact, 'Abd al-'Azīz was even inclined to initiate contacts with the USSR, which not only becomes the first country that

³⁶ James Wynbrandt, op. cit., pp. 188-189.

recognises, in 1932 the newly proclaimed Kingdom of Saudi Arabia but offers a financial support of 1 million pound sterling. Although the agreement was not finalised, it showed that, in the époque, the Saudi diplomacy was less conditioned by ideological prejudices: the lack of reticence towards an atheist regime like the Soviet Union, the availability to make room, in the regional plane, for an external power who was in an elevated rivalry with foreign political-economic actors (firstly Great Britain, The United States, the new emerging power, France) that assumed role of control in the Gulf and generally in the Middle East. The relations with the USSR grew cold in 1938 (once with the closing of the Soviet diplomatic agency in Riyadh) more because of Moscow's initiative, disappointed by the effort of drawing Ibn Saud in its sphere of influence following his refusal to sign an accord of friendship and long-standing economic exchanges, although in the end the Saudi sovereign had suspicions regarding the authentic Soviet interests in the region³⁷.

Even if, in order to attenuate the financial destabilisation of the kingdom and thus to exercise a possible control over the political options of the Saudi sovereign, Great Britain continued the grant of subsidies, 'Abd al-'Azīz continued to pursue a strategy of multiplying his global financial and politic relations until the end of the Second World War. Ibn Saud's lack of inhibitions was once again visible, as he did not have any reticence to sign contracts and initiate discussions with the Axis powers. Thus, at the end of the 30's, an agreement of armament delivery was concluded with fascist Italy (in 1937, Rome substitutes itself to London in finalizing the Jeddah airfield). Nazi Germany followed, with which diplomatic relations were established in January 1939 (doubled by military contracts), especially because of the efficient personal contacts of the German envoy Fritz Grobba, a key figure of the Nazi politics in the Middle East, who contributed to attracting the Arab leaders in the German sphere of influence during the years following the start of the conflict. He transmitted to 'Abd al-'Azīz Hitler's promise to recognise him as the leader of the Arab world, in exchange of a military offensive against the British troops in the Gulf³⁸. Also in 1939, Ibn Saud signed a Treaty of Friendship and Commercial Agreements with Japan. Even if the concrete results of these new directions of Saudi action were limited, they produced positive adjacent effects for the kingdom's budget, resuscitating the fear of the English officials of seeing the region swing over in a pro-German and anti-British front with devastating effects at the time of the start of the military conflict with Germany. The Saudi ambiguous attitude was contemporary with the pro-German coup attempts from the other Gulf States under British influence (Iraq, Iran) and the

³⁷ John Baldry, "Soviet Relations with Saudi Arabia and the Yemen 1917-1938", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1984, pp. 53-80.

³⁸ Ibn Saud's authentic position in relation to Nazi Germany is still the subject of controversy among historians. If L. Hirszowicz (*The Third Reich and the Arab East*, Routledge, 1966, p 52) believes that Saudi sovereign had intended to take advantage of the rivalry between Germany and Britain to consolidate its position pending outcome of the conflict, instead Daniel Silverfarb („Britain and Saudi Arabia on the Eve of the Second World War", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 1983, p. 409), based on studying British archives, pleased for the idea of a pro-Allied subtle but definite neutrality.

anti-British destabilising actions in Palestine, where Berlin supported mufti Amin al-Husseini's nationalist Arab movement. As a consequence, the Saudi neutrality was bought by the British, over the length of the war, with the recommencement of granting Abd al-Aziz important subsidies: after 1940, London regularly delivered 1 million pounds sterling per year to the Saudi sovereign.

As a new proof of his diplomatic charisma, during the last days of the conflict, Ibn Saud declared war against Nazi Germany, which mounted to the fact that, at the end of the hostilities, Saudi Arabia triumphantly placed itself among the winners, with image benefits in the new international order – the kingdom became a UN member in a short time. At the same time, the former unpredictable partner with a presence and much to adjacent interests – Great Britain, was substituted by the new international power after the war, that now benefitted by a double quality, extremely valuable for Abd al-Aziz: it was extremely rich and, in the époque, sufficiently far so that it would attenuate some of the security anguishes of the Saudi leader. The marriage between Saudi Arabia and The United States, one of the most influential and controversial regional and international partnerships of the post-War period, was officially celebrated immediately after the end of the war, although it was precluded by an engagement interval of over ten years during which the two partners discovered each other's qualities and the benefits of such an alliance. It originated in the fact that the first oil companies installed in the Hassa province even since 1932 were the American ones, as opposed to Iraq and Iran, areas where the extraction was leased to British and French companies. The intensification of the exploitation, from 1938 onwards and the massive funds brought on by the CASOC partnership, the future ARAMCO, had a decisive role in Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud's decision to consider The United States as a strategic partner – and financially, much more credible and especially unproblematic as the kingdom's security was concerned, by contrast to the European powers, who had constant ambitions in the Middle East.

Thus, his historical meeting with president Roosevelt after the former returned from Yalta, which took place on the cruiser Quincy on the 14th of February 1945, anchored on the Suez Canal at Great Bitter Lake, set into shape Saudi Arabia's future pro-American options and its strategies of political, military and petroleum cooperation³⁹. The institutionalisation of this "marriage of convenience"⁴⁰ set the stage for one of the most durable and pragmatic partnerships of the Middle East, in which Saudi Arabia, being in an "unceasing pursuit of security"⁴¹, assured its internal and external stability, the permanence of the regime, the financial development, while the United States were recognised as a strategic partner in the Persian Gulf area, exclusive collaborator in oil exploitation, allied in different political and economic situations at a regional and international level.

³⁹ William Eddy, *FDR Meets Ibn Saud*, America-Mideast Educational & Training Services, Inc., 1954, reprinted by Selwa Press 2005, http://www.social-sciences-and-humanities.com/pdf/FDR_Meets_Ibn_Saud.pdf.

⁴⁰ Pollak Josh, "Saudi Arabia and United States, 1931-2002", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 6, nr. 3, 2002.

⁴¹ Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia. The Ceaseless Quest for Security*, Cornell University Press, 1988.

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