

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Article Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 319

Published on 29 July 2011

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editors: George Fujii and John Vurpillat

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

**Maurice Jr. M. Labelle. "The Only Thorn': Early Saudi-American Relations and the Question of Palestine, 1945-1949."** *Diplomatic History* 35:2 (April 2011): 257-281. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00949.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00949.x>.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR319.pdf>

Review by **W. Taylor Fain**, University of North Carolina Wilmington

The literature on the United States' diplomacy in the Middle East during the early years of the Cold War is voluminous, as is the literature on President Harry S. Truman's policies towards Palestine and the new state of Israel. Still, Maurice Labelle makes a welcome contribution to this scholarship with his article "The Only Thorn': Early Saudi-American Relations and the Question of Palestine, 1945-1949." Whereas earlier historians have assessed the role of Cold War strategy in shaping U.S. policy towards Palestine as well as the domestic political sources of Truman's decision to recognize Israel, Labelle examines the agency of the Arab governments in the region in the unfolding drama. His article aims to grant "the Arab states – in this case Saudi Arabia – a voice within U.S. decision making." By highlighting American leaders' attempts to balance their "Palestinian policy between political Zionism and Saudi Arabia," Labelle demonstrates "that the former was not always central to U.S. policymaking and that the latter played an integral part in the formation of official American views." (289)

Labelle explains how the United States was obliged to formulate an impossibly complex diplomacy that attempted to placate its oil-rich and strategically located Saudi allies while attending to the dissolution of the British mandate in Palestine and addressing the politically charged issue of whether to recognize a Jewish state. More important, though, Labelle illuminates the matrix of interests that propelled Saudi diplomacy in this period. His study focuses on the efforts of King Abdul Aziz to insure the survival of his young kingdom against those he considered his regional enemies. Its examination of the geopolitical underpinnings of the inter-Arab rivalry in the Middle East is what gives the article its interpretive power. Abdul Aziz, Labelle shows, faced the equally complex task of establishing his image as patron and protector of the Palestinian Arabs, maintaining good relations with his American allies, and containing the regional ambitions of the Hashemite monarchies to his north. Labelle's analysis of these issues allows him to parse

the difficult course of American and Saudi policies towards each other and to elucidate the global, and especially the regional, context of the Palestine issue in the late 1940s.

During the Second World War, the United States came to recognize the critical importance of Saudi oil to waging the conflict and fueling postwar reconstruction and defense requirements. American planners also appreciated that the kingdom's military facilities would help secure Western economic interests and enable the United States to project power abroad after the war ended. The United States, with the encouragement of Abdul Aziz, adroitly supplanted Britain as the kingdom's most important foreign patron before the war's conclusion. The Saudi king did not trust British motives in the Middle East and saw the United States as a useful counterweight to Britain. More important, the Saudis were leery of Britain's regional client states, the Hashemite states of Iraq and Transjordan.

Fear of "Hashemite encirclement" was crucial in shaping Saudi foreign policy in the middle of the twentieth century, and Labelle adeptly outlines Abdul Aziz's obsession with the machinations of his family's traditional rivals in the Arabian Peninsula. Abdul Aziz's views on the Palestine question were shaped, in large part, by his determination to thwart the regional ambitions of Amir Abdullah of Transjordan. Abdullah's grandiose plans to establish himself as ruler of a 'Greater Syria' in Palestine, Transjordan, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Hejaz province of Saudi Arabia greatly alarmed the Saudis. Labelle concludes, "The House of Saud's primary ambition [thus became] to protect the territorial integrity of its kingdom and stymie the ascendancy of its nemesis, the Hashemites." (288)

Labelle shows that the issue of Palestine, perhaps intractable to begin with, was even more difficult for Abdul Aziz and his American allies to address given the deep suspicions and divisions within the Arab world. Moreover, the king's initial enthusiasm for his new American allies, cemented during his meeting with President Franklin Roosevelt at the Great Bitter Lake in February 1945, soon evaporated as the Truman administration took steps to support Jewish immigration to Palestine. Still, the Saudis continued to court the Americans even as they positioned themselves as champions of the Palestinian Arabs. Abdul Aziz believed he needed American support against the depredations of the British and their Hashemite allies. Likewise, the Truman administration continued to cast about for ways to balance American strategic and economic interests in the Arab world with its growing commitment to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. The Americans and Saudis were frequently compelled to speak to each other about Palestine out of both sides of their mouths. U.S. policy makers insisted that their support for the Jewish cause in no way contradicted promises to the Saudis that they would consult fully with them before taking steps with regard to Palestine. At the same time, the Saudis insisted that they would make common cause with the other Arab states in opposing the creation of a Jewish state but would do nothing to jeopardize their friendly relationship with Washington.

Labelle contends that, ironically, the creation of the state of Israel in May 1948 and the subsequent Arab-Israeli war “proved to be a blessing in disguise for Saudi-American relations.” (310). They allowed the Truman administration to assume a more balanced position between Israel and the Arab states and to integrate Saudi Arabia more fully into the West’s Middle East security structure. Subsequently, the United States was able to renegotiate successfully its presence at the Dhahran air base in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province and grant Saudi Arabia military assistance and a training package. The issue of Palestine may have been “the only thorn in Saudi-American relations” before the establishment of Israel, but “the question of Palestine could not break its course.” (298, 311)

Labelle’s account of U.S.-Saudi relations is methodologically quite traditional. There is no sign of the “cultural turn” in the history of American foreign relations on these pages. Rather, the article focuses on important issues of strategy and diplomacy as conventionally defined. The author shows a familiarity with, and appreciation of, the most important secondary literature on his subject, but one wishes this were interwoven more seamlessly throughout his analysis. The article is thoroughly grounded in U.S. State Department sources, but in relying so heavily on the American documentary record Labelle confronts an obstacle that bedevils many of us who work on U.S. relations in the developing world during the Cold War: he is unable to tell his story using the records of his most important protagonist. Rather, he is compelled to interpret Saudi motivations and policies through the accounts and analyses of U.S. policy makers. He has done so in a rather sophisticated manner, but Arabic language sources might have helped him do so more thoroughly and persuasively.<sup>1</sup>

The author might profitably have availed himself of two other primary sources in his assessment of the Palestine issue and the inter-Arab rivalry of the period. The Israel State Archives’ *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel* series includes several volumes on the founding period that would have helped the author gain a fuller appreciation of the diplomatic dilemmas faced by Arabs, Jews, and the Western powers in the Middle East. Just as important, a perusal of the British Foreign Office records from the period would have enabled Labelle to draw conclusions about the realities behind Saudi fears of Hashemite schemes for a ‘Greater Syria.’ British officials, it seems, were just as concerned by Abdullah’s ambitions in the region, which they deemed unrealistic and provocative and which they worked to contain, rather than promote.<sup>2</sup> Still, the author’s determination

---

<sup>1</sup> Works by Western historians who have exploited Arabic language sources to illuminate U.S. Middle East policy include Matthew Connolly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East: Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 361-366.

to examine the debate over Palestine from the perspective of a key Arab nation and to trace the complex interactions between regional and great power actors adds a welcome transnational dimension to this important story. Labelle's article should encourage other scholars in their efforts to examine more fully the tortuous course of the Middle East's international history.

**W. Taylor Fain** is Associate Professor of History at the University of North Carolina Wilmington and is the author of *American Ascendancy and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). His current research focuses on Anglo-American diplomacy in the Indian Ocean during the era of decolonization and Cold War.

---

### Copyright © 2011 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).