
URL: http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR378.pdf

Review by David Kinkela, SUNY Fredonia

Chad H. Parker, an Assistant Professor of History and Geography at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, offers a provocative analysis of the political and public health impacts of the Arabian American Oil Company’s anti-malaria campaign in Saudi Arabia from 1947 to 1956. Parker skillfully explores how the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMOC) embraced public health in order to advance its own economic interests. According to Parker, ARAMOC’s malaria control project “was less an altruistic deed than a function of business policy” (474). By trading public health for access to Saudi Arabia’s oil fields, ARAMOC expanded its influence within and across all sectors of the oil-rich country, while promoting American strategic interests as well. “Public health and development,” Parker argues, “became business strategy and diplomacy” (474).

Initially, ARAMOC entered the malaria fight to protect its own workers from the crippling disease. Yet because many of the company’s American employees lived in isolated ‘camps,’ away from local communities and malarious regions, the problems were not difficult to overcome. However, beginning in 1947, as the company established new drilling fields in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, ARAMOC officials recognized the need to establish a comprehensive anti-malaria campaign that enveloped local populations and environments. It was in this context that ARAMOC embarked on a public health campaign.

Parker traces the story of Richard Daggy, ARAMOC’s chief malaria expert and head of its Malaria Control Program. Daggy, a committed public health advocate, saw enormous potential in ARAMOC’s anti-malaria programs because he believed in the link between public health and economic development. But unlike his contemporaries, many of whom understood malaria as a disease responsible for economic underdevelopment, Daggy argued that the Arab lifestyle “exacerbated the malaria problem” and was “directly connected with the local practice of agriculture” (482). In other words, the inefficiencies of...
Saudi agriculture created the context for malaria to exist. For Daggy, malaria "was ‘man-made’ in Saudi Arabia" (481).

According the Parker, Daggy’s understanding of malaria challenged prevailing ideas about disease and development. Many public health officials believed diseases like malaria weakened economic development because it crippled the work force. During the 1940s and 50s, the notion that ‘disease blocks development’ shaped the strategies of public health projects around the world, particularly the eradication of malaria. Daggy’s formulation of the existence of malaria in Saudi Arabia suggested that ARAMOC would undertake a more comprehensive approach to public health. But this did not come to pass. Instead, Daggy embraced the power and promise of the new chemical pesticide, DDT. ARAMCO’s anti-malaria work subsequently focused on mosquito control rather than social change and economic development. The question is why.

For Parker, ARAMCO’s anti-malaria efforts reveal two main problems. One, if Daggy understood malaria to be a man-made problem, why did he rely on a DDT spray strategy to fight malaria. Second, and perhaps much more significant to diplomatic historians, was how ARAMCO’s public health work shaped its relationship with Saudi Arabia and what this tells us about corporate diplomacy at the onset of the Cold War. Parker offers an insightful and convincing analysis of the first question, but only tangential evidence to support the second question.

Increasingly popular among malaria fighters worldwide, DDT offered the promise and possibility of eliminating and even eradicating malaria. Indeed, DDT made fighting malaria simple. Public health workers could simply spray the pesticide on interior walls where mosquitoes rested after taking their blood meal, or on ponds, irrigation ditches, puddles, or wherever mosquito larvae matured. Despite Daggy’s assumption about the causes of malaria in Saudi Arabia, Parker argues that DDT and the enthusiasm its use generated among malaria fighters created a “powerful malaria control discourse” (483) that superseded any alternative approaches to disease control. According to Parker, “Daggy’s own training as an entomologist… the larger buzz surrounding DDT, and the unique climate of the oases pushed him to favor vector control (485).”

Secondly, ARAMCO’s anti-malaria program underscores a significant moment in the history of corporate-led development and diplomacy. As Parker rightly suggests, much of the scholarship on postwar development focuses on the actions of state-sponsored projects like Harry Truman’s Point Four and John F. Kennedy’s Agency for International Development (USAID) or on the role of non-state actors like the Rockefeller Foundation. ARAMCO, on the other hand, understood development as a key to advancing its corporate interest as well as the political interests of the United States. According to Parker, “the company served as the principal American diplomatic, political, and cultural agent in Saudi Arabia in the mid-twentieth century” (474).

While Parker effectively demonstrates ARAMCO’s impact in malaria control and its political influence within Saudi Arabia, he is less clear in detailing the relationship between the oil giant and U.S. policy makers. Certainly, access to Saudi Arabia’s rich oil fields was in the
strategic interests of both ARAMCO and the United States, but Parker does not fully explain how the relationship developed and changed over time. Perhaps the constraints of an article-length essay precluded a more detailed analysis of the intersection between state and corporate interests. Further evidence showing ARAMCO’s diplomatic efforts in the name of the state would have made a strong article stronger. Hopefully, Parker will explore the intersections of the state and corporate interest more thoroughly elsewhere.

Despite this problem, Parker introduces his readers to an important history of postwar development. He provides a fascinating look at ARAMCO’s public health work in Saudi Arabia and skillfully situates the company’s anti-malaria campaign within the broader history of global public health, international development, and the Cold War, which offers a unique glimpse into the history of corporate development during the postwar period. Because of this, Parker’s essay should be required reading for all historians who are interested in postwar development.