
Aramco's Frontier Story

The Arabian American Oil Company and Creative Mapping in Postwar Saudi Arabia

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In the late 1940s and 1950s, the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) became intricately involved in Saudi Arabian territorial disputes. The story of Aramco and the Buraymi Oasis, located on the eastern borders of Saudi Arabia, was one manifest in everything from border skirmishes to high diplomacy, but also one that included creative storytelling and the selective use of the past for corporate and national ends. Company story makers operated outside the firm's public relations realm in aid of the Saudi monarchy in its border dispute with the British protectorates of Oman and Abu Dhabi. Using history as a tool of border construction, the Arabian American Oil Company attempted to alter the past to secure its present and expand its future. To protect its privileged position as the sole oil company operating in the kingdom, Aramco representatives cautiously supported Saudi claims, pressured the U.S. government, and dissembled the British government. Through the use of historians, anthropologists, and public relations officials in the company Relations Department and through the hiring of lawyers to serve the Saudi government, Aramco boldly charted a diplomatic path of its own and ensured its place as the sole oil company operating in Saudi Arabia.

States are not the only actors engaged in high diplomacy. Nongovernmental actors' involvement in foreign relations, however, remains an understudied historical phenomenon. More recently scholars have begun to assess nonstate actions more critically.¹ Aramco's cultural and diplomatic endeavors in Saudi Arabia provide scholars an opportunity to explore corporate involvement in international affairs in new ways, illustrating more clearly the significant impact oil companies had in driving U.S. interests in

the Middle East. No study of mid-twentieth-century U.S.–Saudi relations can be complete without assessing the role of transnational oil corporations.² While some historians like Akira Iriye hesitate to include profit-seeking enterprises among non-governmental entities,³ Aramco wielded enormous power that allowed it far-reaching influence in Saudi Arabian affairs. The company's placement in what Daniel Yergin refers to as the “postwar petroleum order” that emerged out of World War II established what diplomatic historians call a corporatist framework in U.S. foreign oil policy. After failed wartime attempts to acquire a controlling share of oil interests in Saudi Arabia, construct an Arabian pipeline, and orchestrate Anglo-American management of Middle Eastern oil, the United States, historians have shown, turned to private enterprise to lead the way.⁴ Aramco operated in Saudi Arabia like a state, and it included among its employees a host of scholars who worked to define the company's presence as progressive through an exceptionalist narrative, thereby expanding its command of the nation's natural resources.

Narrative serves as a powerful tool to a corporate entity interested in expanding its presence along the frontiers of the Rub al-Khali, or Empty Quarter, as the Americans called the southern Arabian desert, and narrating the new Saudi state into the distant past. By reimagining the historical connections between the land and the people living on it, Aramco's historians were able to recast widely held notions of territorial claims and compel the great powers to grapple with previously “settled” issues.⁵ This new and improved narrative served, as James Ferguson phrases it, like a “blueprint [laying] down fundamental categories and meanings for the organization and interpretation of experience.”⁶ When the company's own publications referred to the “Aramco story,” they placed the company, its employees, and the Saudi Kingdom into a carefully constructed narrative that promoted partnership and the company's role in Saudi development.⁷ Through support of Saudi Arabia's new territorial claims, the oil company participated in the politics and diplomacy of border creation to secure future oil fields and placate the Saudi monarchy.

As part of its narrative construction, Aramco changed its name in 1944 from the California Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC), adopting a moniker that represented to the company a “more appropriate title.” It amplified the notion of an Aramco–Saudi “partnership” emerging as a foundation for company relations with the Saudi monarchy.⁸ The significance of the name change at the time seemed relatively trivial to American consular officials in the area, but Aramco officials believed it better symbolized their operations.⁹ The company's employee handbook, first published in 1950, helped enmesh American employees in this corporate narrative.¹⁰ The “Miracle of American Production”—not far from the Fertile Crescent—relied on American employees who would help deliver civilization to Saudi Arabia. The

"Arabian-American Partnership" required it.¹¹ Employees represented much more than a slice of the company; they symbolized, the handbook stressed, "the *American* way of doing things." It was important that employees recognized their "responsibility to the American nation."¹² Aramco's connection to economic development factored prominently in the corporate identity. The "modern" American oil business was expertly juxtaposed with the "ancient" oil business of the Middle East dating as far back as 4000 BCE. "The adventurous, restless energies typical of Americans," brought technological advancements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The company's work could be measured "by the clock of the centuries" as American values replaced ancient traditions in the Eastern Province, transporting Saudi Arabia into the twentieth century.¹³ Aramco symbolized finished development. Saudi Arabia symbolized a nation in transition.

The Arabian American Oil Company carefully crafted its self-image as a partner in Saudi nation-building from the beginning of its concession in the early 1930s through the early 1970s. A positive relationship with the monarchy required building and maintaining goodwill, and while one might argue that this mythmaking served primarily to mask exploitative corporate behavior, the narrative was central to Aramco's interaction with the Saudi monarchy.¹⁴ The company used its massive public relations arm to construct a narrative of Saudi Arabian tradition and to situate the company as a necessary partner in Saudi nation-building. Aramco's representations of Saudi Arabia and itself through various media demonstrated the company's imagined and constructed role in the Arab world. The monarchy, in turn, encouraged this narrative as it sought to consolidate its rule and assert ever-expanding land claims.¹⁵

The Arabian American Oil Company's public relations arm often boasted in the 1940s that the oil giant was a "unique organization." And in many ways, it was. Aramco, alone, dominated Saudi oil exploration and made a more substantial impact on life in Saudi Arabia's enormous Eastern Province than any other Western institution, including the U.S. government, in the mid-twentieth century. This distinctiveness, expressed in corporate public relations, implied much more, however. It spoke to a self-defined corporate agenda of enlightened capitalism. Much of the energy behind this legend stems from the company's Government Relations Organization, which consisted of divisions for government affairs, local affairs, and research and translation. George Rentz, historian and Arabist with a PhD from Berkeley, led the department from 1946 to 1963 and hired similarly enthusiastic men, significantly the anthropologist Federico Vidal, who penned numerous regional studies for the company and the kingdom, and William Mulligan, who wrote about the company for the corporate magazine and other publications. These men conducted extensive research and produced a bounty of reports on Saudi Arabia and the corporation, carefully crafting a

story of corporate enlightenment, one that served multiple objectives. It provided the foundation for the company's engagement with the monarchy, whose continued backing Aramco required to exploit the kingdom for its riches. To fashion and promote its image, the company submitted simplified annual reports to the monarchy and shareholders and published an employee magazine and official histories of both the company and Saudi Arabia. But the project did more than position the company rhetorically alongside the monarchy. It elevated Aramco's status as U.S. representative in the kingdom, entangling it in both local politics and international diplomacy, including Saudi boundary claims on the eastern frontier.¹⁶

The oil company worked alongside Saudi Arabia's king 'Abd al-Aziz ibn Sa'ud as he turned to science and technology to expand his authority. It was a nation-building dependent on new technologies for communication, transportation, and administration, and Aramco situated itself as an indispensable partner in this social and economic development.¹⁷ To promote the "distinctly American flavor" of Saudi oil, as company publications put it, Aramco constructed its own frontier epic.¹⁸ After initial contact in the deserts of the Eastern Province, geologists began their search for oil in 1933.¹⁹ With the help of local Bedouin, who acted as guides, American oilmen confronted an ancient, backward, society as they probed the desert for riches. Soon after the discovery of oil in marketable quantities, American oilmen became guides themselves, ushering the kingdom into the twentieth century through various development schemes. Petroleum engineers, construction experts, doctors, agricultural specialists, and more began erecting transportation, communication, and industrial infrastructure, transferring not just objects, but the ideas that came with them. This story that Aramco composed culminates with the successful transfer of new Western values. The Saudi Arabian government emerged as a "modern" nation-state, institutionalizing new technologies and ideas and eventually taking control of oil operations. While nationalization of oil operations in other parts of the world meant conflict, Aramco's transfer to the Saudi Arabian government proceeded smoothly, owing in large part to the mutually respectful relationship forged by corporate executives for decades. The story is compelling, for sure, but the image of a corporation with a soul shepherding an ancient civilization into the modern age obscures much of the exploitation occurring on the Saudi frontier, and it ignores the powerful corporate interests at work.²⁰ Aramco constructed its world through an allegory meant to position the company as a partner in Saudi nation-building, helping promote it as the catalyst for development in Saudi Arabia.²¹ This project found partial success, as the company indeed acted as the primary diplomatic representative of the United States for years, but also it demanded constant vigilance, requiring that corporate agents act on behalf of the burgeoning state. With the outset of the Cold War and evolving

U.S. interests in the Middle East after World War II, Aramco's private diplomacy faced challenges on many fronts, and ultimately it surrendered some of its influence to the U.S. government.

Aramco's story has drama, ample explanation, and a certain degree of exceptionalism, all in the service of institution building. This sort of story is what Margaret Somers refers to as an institutional narrative, which is a powerful force in identity construction.²² Like any exceptionalist account, Aramco's is selective; certain aspects of the past go unreported. While the link between particular stories and identity might not seem readily apparent, the function of this classic tale is to set actors, in this case Aramco's American employees, into an established mythic teleology.²³ But by establishing corporate benevolence as a core of the story, Aramco found itself working toward Saudi ends in order to protect its privileged place as the sole oil company operating in the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia's king 'Abd al-Aziz surprised nearly everyone in 1949 when he declared the Buraymi Oasis, located in the border regions in the kingdom's southeast, part of his domain, but Aramco remained a steadfast supporter nonetheless. On October 14, the Saudi government officially demarcated its eastern borders, about one hundred miles east of British counterclaims. These newly proposed boundaries represented quite an expansion from those drawn in 1935, and they caught Aramco off guard. The company had prepared maps for a 1948 report on oil in the Middle East that placed Saudi Arabia's eastern boundary far west of the new claims.²⁴ From that point forward, however, the company's public relations team made Saudi Arabia's past present through studies compiled by anthropologist Federico Vidal and Arabist George Rentz. Aramco accepted the new Saudi claims without question, and it worked to prepare the Saudi government for making legal claims. Vidal penned the study *The Oasis of Al-Hasa* in the early 1950s as part of an attempt to understand the people of the nearby al-Hasa oasis. As company operations moved south of Dhahran into the kingdom's interior, through the construction of railroads and new oil fields, it was clear that construction material, labor, agricultural supplies, oil contract work, and other supplies and services would need to come directly from the region. By studying al-Hasa, Vidal hoped to measure the effects the company was having on oasis residents and area Bedouin, and more important, to gauge whether local residents were prepared to enter into employment with Aramco.²⁵ The study built on an earlier work on the region produced by George Rentz and William Mulligan, which outlined the Saudi influence on the eastern frontier. Rentz's subsequent study of Oman addressed this subject again, this time with a more specific interest in boundaries. Here, he detailed the status of territory that he claimed remained "undefined" or, he said, under control of neighboring governments. While much of the region had been "defined" and had

been controlled by others for some time, this study, not incidentally, helped strengthen the Saudi monarchy's claims on territory outside the kingdom.²⁶

Using reports from travelers and other evidence, Rentz placed the contested Buraymi Oasis well within Saudi authority, arguing that the British protectorates of Oman and Abu Dhabi had little historic claim to the region. The dispute ignited a conflict between Saudi Arabia and Great Britain, which hoped to preserve its imperial posture on the Arabian Peninsula. British foreign-office officials quarreled with much of Rentz's research, arguing that he misled readers about the nature and extent of control exercised by central Arabian leaders.²⁷ Meanwhile, Aramco executives played a difficult game in Saudi Arabia, attempting to pressure the U.S. government, mollify the British government, support the Saudi monarchy, and protect its concession. Aramco's selective use of the past indicates the degrees to which corporate diplomacy extended into state and identity formation on the Saudi frontier in the late 1940s and 1950s.

The story of the Anglo-Saudi dispute over the Buraymi Oasis is well known and expertly covered by historians who evaluate the affair according to the political and diplomatic interests of states. Nathan Citino argues that Buraymi was not about expanding oil resources, exactly, but about fundamental differences in the U.S. and British governments' foreign oil policies and "historical experiences in the Middle East." The dispute pitted numerous actors against one another, all with different interests, approaches, and histories in the region. The U.S. and British governments argued from different historical vantage points. Britain maintained a longtime imperial presence in the Middle East, where the United States had no formal historical ties. And while Britain conducted its oil diplomacy through state apparatuses, the Americans relied more on corporate leadership. During the Buraymi dispute, the United States hoped to improve relations with the Middle East and prevent Soviet advancements in the region as the Cold War heated up, whereas the British hoped to retain its presence in the region and standing as a world power. The Saudis had a deep distrust of the British, which supported rival Arab clans for leadership positions in neighboring states. In making these new claims, the monarchy hoped, in part, to dispel any appearance of complicity with Western imperialism in the Middle East, to its close ties to the Americans, who looked suspicious in an era of emerging Arab nationalism. For the states involved in the conflict, Citino maintains, the dispute was less about oil than international and regional politics.²⁸ Similarly, Tore Tingvold Petersen sees the dispute as a competition between growing American economic interests in the Arabian Peninsula and fading British imperial interests there.²⁹ From a corporate perspective, however, it was absolutely about oil and power. Aramco's actions during the height of the dispute indicate an interest in securing its place as the sole exploiter of Saudi oil reserves.

The Buraymi Oasis is situated in the east of the Arabian Peninsula near the southern border of the present-day United Arab Emirates and the western border of Oman. To the south and the west is the Rub al-Khali, the Empty Quarter as the desert was known in the West. In the 1950s, Buraymi consisted of eight villages, about six miles across, circling its water wells. Settled farmers in the area mainly grew dates, with some fruit and other grains grown as well, and pastoral farmers (mainly Bedouin) raised camels, goats, and sheep. The scarcity of vegetation prevented much more economic activity than that. For centuries, the oasis served as a strategic outpost and a point of departure for armies staging invasions to the east. And while no oil had been found in the region by 1949, expectations remained high.³⁰

The Saudi monarchy's move in Buraymi stirred international alarm, and Aramco quickly positioned the company alongside the Saudi Arabian government as a protector of Saudi interests and a potential guarantor of American protection. Saudi soldiers and company surveyors descended on the border regions to the east as early as the spring of 1949. Accompanying this team were officials from Aramco's Relations Department. Conducting operations like geological reconnaissance, water testing, and data compilations on the natural and cultural aspects of the region took up most of the relations men's time.³¹ This seemingly innocuous activity, however, troubled the British, who on April 21, 1949, dispatched two armed soldiers along with Patrick Stobart of the Foreign Service, a brother of the Shaikh of Abu Dhabi, and an employee of the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), jointly owned by British and American firms. Stobart "rather officiously" announced to Paul Combs, a company driller, that the Saudi-American party was in Abu Dhabi territory and must leave. Combs encouraged him to meet with "company men" and Saudi officials at the base camp, at which point the encounter became heated. Saudi soldiers disarmed the two guards, revealing that the guards carried loaded weapons, heightening tensions even further. Unhappy, Stobart exclaimed, "This is going to cause a frightful stink!"³² While this British demonstration of power on the Saudi frontier appeared weak, before departing Stobart handed Aramco employee Don Holm a note declaring the trespass and advising all parties to leave "before any possible incident occurs between the Saudis and the Subjects of Abu Dhabi."³³ The political problems this could generate would have been quite clear to the Aramco surveyors and relations men, who must have known the oasis's recent history. As late as 1945, the oasis served as a meeting place for the sheiks of Trucial Oman and the British government to discuss ongoing wars between the Sheik of Abu Dhabi and the Sheik of Dubai.³⁴ This encounter would be the opening salvo in a long dispute that always had the potential to become very violent.

The Saudi Arabian government agreed to enter negotiations regarding its eastern boundaries but insisted that the regions' historical social and economic practices be

the basis for talks. The British rejected this stipulation from the start, noting two problems. First, nomadic tribal boundaries made defining territorial boundaries almost impossible. Second, contemporary politics heightened the importance of the area. A British subsidiary of the IPC, it seems, had already begun explorations in the region, angering the Saudi king.³⁵ Despite these differences, the parties met in Riyadh beginning on August 30, 1949. The Saudis confirmed the extent of their claims, deep within the territory of Abu Dhabi, far too deep for either the sheikh of Abu Dhabi or the British government to accept. Moving forward, arguments centered on the starting point for negotiations, often based on various British treaties signed over the preceding decades that had established the eastern frontier.³⁶

The dispute worried American oil executives, who consistently promoted the Saudi position. Manley Hudson, an Aramco lawyer who served the monarchy in its legal disputes, argued to U.S. State Department officials that attempted British intimidation of the Saudis frustrated relations more than anything. The monarchy hoped to negotiate with regional sheikhs, not the British, who the king argued had no legal authority. Many times in 1950, Aramco pushed this line of reasoning, hoping Washington would support Saudi claims.³⁷ The following February, 'Abd al-Aziz formally requested Aramco's assistance in preparing his legal claim on the region. In particular, the king asked for research specialist and historian George Rentz. Aramco began planning a fact-finding mission, which would include studies of geographical features, tribal considerations, and tax collection.³⁸ While a year earlier, Hudson stated clearly that "tribal allegiances and the extent of their ranges are too conflicting or indefinite to offer a fully reliable basis for judgment," that was exactly how Rentz and his aids chose to support the Saudi case. Apparently, Hudson's position evolved, signaling corporate thinking, as he later noted that Saudi tax collection in the disputed territory provided sufficient legal claim.³⁹ This position is important when one considers the meaning of tax collection, historically, on the Saudi frontier.

The first of the Saud family to emerge as a regional leader in the eighteenth century, Muhammad ibn Sa'ud, employed *zakat*, an Islamic tax paid to the Muslim community's leader, as a way to centralize and consolidate his authority in central Arabia. Originally part of the duty of Muslims as one of the pillars of Islam, it eventually became part of permanent administrative governance, and it is a tradition that survived into the mid-twentieth century.⁴⁰ A wealthy landowner and local emir, Muhammad ibn Sa'ud's financial backing of commerce and protection of area tribes provided him a position of status and allowed him to collect tribute, or tax, from residents in the region. To enhance his political standing, ibn Sa'ud allied with Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, an Islamic reformer who provided the religious legitimacy to Saud's political authority. As the Wahhab-Sa'ud alliance expanded control in the mid-eighteenth

century, tribes continued to show fealty to the emir through the payment of *zakat*. It was, historian Madawi Al-Rasheed notes, “a token of political submission.” Taxes and Wahabbi religious austerity helped consolidate local authority in an era when borders meant very little. ‘Abd al-Aziz continued this approach in the early twentieth century as he expanded his reach in central Arabia, and *zakat* emerged as one of his most valuable revenue sources before the discovery of oil. This system of taxation served as a key mechanism for how ‘Abd al-Aziz centralized and consolidated his rule in what would become Saudi Arabia in 1932, as taxes could then be redistributed to maintain alliances with outlying tribes.⁴¹ Since taxes paid by tribes defined allegiance on the Saudi frontier for centuries, it is no wonder it was such an important part of the Saudi claim on the Buraymi Oasis.

Whatever the historical basis for Saudi claims, the monarchy also hoped the U.S. government might help coax British acceptance of the Saudi position. In a 1950 letter of friendship to ‘Abd al-Aziz, President Harry Truman noted his satisfaction that American private enterprise was working to develop the kingdom and added that “the United States is interested in the preservation of the independence and territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia. No threat to your Kingdom could occur which would not be a matter of immediate concern to the United States.”⁴² Nearly three years later, the king and his son, Crown Prince Saud, evoked this letter to the new secretary of state John Foster Dulles when he arrived in Riyadh as part of a Near East trip. They demanded American support. Dulles maintained an aloof posture, however, stating that it was not his place to dictate to the British and, furthermore, the dispute was not existential but rather just a problem of boundaries. He maintained that Saudi Arabia was not under attack.⁴³

In this environment, talks between the Saudis and British proceeded slowly with tensions often running high. The British called for international arbitration and the Saudis requested either U.S. mediation or submission to the United Nations. The Americans shuttered at a mediating role between two allies, one with oil and the other a key to its regional and global security interests, and they were anxious about the dispute going to the Security Council, where State Department officials worried the Soviet Union might score a propaganda victory against Western imperialism. Additionally, the United States had been unfavorable to arbitration, seeing it, too, as an opportunity for Soviet propaganda, but it soon became the most agreeable option. With no clear end to the dispute in sight, in August 1952 ‘Abd al-Aziz sent Saudi emir Turki bin ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Utayshan with a forty-man occupying force to the Hamasa settlement within the Buraymi Oasis, escalating tensions further.⁴⁴ The British responded with a blockade, hoping to prevent resupply of Turki’s party, and they began to discuss military options. ‘Abd al-Aziz still held out hope for American

mediation, but the United States only offered to request that the British lift the blockade and discontinue provocative Royal Air Force (RAF) overflights. The British agreed to end the flights, but local forces loyal to the Sultan of Muscat mobilized soon after, as did more Saudi troops. Meanwhile, Turki, it seemed, had been bribing local tribes since his arrival in August. The British, for their part, played a similar game, reportedly sending a Desert Locust Control Mission to the Oasis from nearby Sharja.⁴⁵ While the British continued to push arbitration, the Saudis now introduced a new plan: a plebiscite of local residents, something the king believed he would win handily. Britain and Saudi Arabia eventually reached a standstill agreement on October 26, 1952, hoping to ease tensions for a time while a permanent settlement could be reached. But this too caused conflict, as Turki used the calmer atmosphere to continue offering bribes in return for support of Saudi claims.⁴⁶

Buraymi's importance to British imperial policy expanded rapidly in the early 1950s. This was the start of a difficult period for the British in the Middle East, which would end in the surrender of regional hegemony to the United States. The refusal of the British government-controlled Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) to negotiate a fifty-fifty profit-sharing agreement on oil revenues with the Iranian government, coupled with the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Arab Nationalism in Egypt that led to the Suez Crisis, seriously challenged the British position in the Middle East. With Buraymi came a possibility to secure future oil rights—something the British refused to give up on easily—while maintaining a degree of international prestige.⁴⁷

In defense of its own strategic interests, the U.S. government privately sided with the Saudi monarchy, but publically it came to support arbitration as a time-honored—and probably the best—diplomatic solution. Clearly Washington's interests remained divided. Aramco held concessionary rights in Saudi Arabia, but other U.S. oil companies, including two of Aramco's parent companies, held rights through British syndicates, including the IPC, the Bahrain Petroleum Company (Bapco), Superior Oil Company, and the Kuwait Oil Company.⁴⁸ Further, U.S. State Department officials remained unconvinced by Saudi arguments, but they warned embassy officials not to share this information with the Saudi monarchy.⁴⁹

Saudi Arabia and Great Britain finally agreed on arbitration on July 31, 1954, but tension remained high. The agreement called for an Arbitration Tribunal to define a permanent boundary between Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi. The committee was to have five members, one nominated by Britain, one by Saudi Arabia, and three with no ties to either. Both agreed to halt expansion of oil operations beyond the Aramco and IPC teams already in place.⁵⁰ Additionally, each side was to remove its forces, except fifteen soldiers.⁵¹ A change in government in London, however, altered the British approach. New Prime Minister Anthony Eden looked to take a tougher line

than his predecessor Winston Churchill, as British power waned in Iran and Egypt.⁵² So when arbitration began the next summer, it ended almost immediately after the British delegate resigned the tribunal in disgust over alleged Saudi tampering. The British charged the Saudis with bribing local leaders, improperly influencing the Pakistani delegate to the tribunal, and plotting a coup in Abu Dhabi. While the first charge is true and the second likely, there is scant evidence of the third.⁵³ But as a result, arbitration fell apart, and on October 16, 1955, the new British government seized the oasis with force, declaring a new border unilaterally.⁵⁴

The military occupation did little to ease tensions, and it frustrated U.S. officials, who hoped the British would see that American oil interests benefited the entire West. The British had no intention of relinquishing their position, one Prime Minister Eden maintained was enormously important if Britain were to remain a regional power. It did not stop American Pure to return to arbitration, and events elsewhere in the Middle East soon took precedence for the British, as the Suez Crisis heated up. Regardless of their differences on Buraymi, Anglo-American relations before Suez seemed positive, except for one issue. A July 1956 British policy paper called Aramco "the greatest obstacle to Anglo-American harmony in the Middle East."⁵⁵ Anglo-Saudi friction remained for years to come. Saudi support for rebels in Oman in 1957 led to further military incursions by the British; meanwhile American oil executives assured U.S. and British officials that they were uninvolved.⁵⁶ Diplomatic relations were restored in 1963, with plans to settle the Buraymi dispute once and for all.⁵⁷ Over a decade later, Saudi Arabia finally signed a treaty with the United Arab Emirates that defined the eastern borders of Saudi Arabia.⁵⁸ Buraymi would not be part of Saudi Arabia.

Aramco's role in the dispute, while seemingly small, speaks volumes to its corporate diplomacy. The company, to be sure, maintained a distance from the dispute early, claiming it simply served at the pleasure of the Saudi monarchy. George Ray, a lawyer for the company, declared that oil explorations done on behalf of the king were about pleasing him, not corporate political interests.⁵⁹ If the Saudi government wanted an area explored, the company argued, it was wise to do so. In 1952, Aramco published Rentz's study of the southern and eastern borders of Saudi Arabia. Much like the corporate image making before it, Rentz used history to situate the company as a diplomatic partner, this time through boundary making. Aside from providing readers with a description of the region, Rentz himself stated in 1951, "This study is an attempt to bring to light the truth regarding areas where boundaries on the mainland happen to be in dispute." Further, he hoped it would "be of value to those who are actively engaged in the endeavor to settle the boundary problems that now exist."⁶⁰

Rentz placed the Buraymi Oasis well within Saudi authority, claiming that the Trucial sheikhs, and therefore the British, had no historic claim to the region, and his history provided the basis for the Saudi arguments a few years later at the aborted arbitration. A look at the arbitration documents illustrates how the company and monarchy defined the disputed region's future by looking to a constructed past. The Saudi position rested on its claim that Buraymi was a Saudi possession for centuries, that the Saudi family protected the oasis over that time period, that when family control "lapsed," the region fell into disorder, and that effective rule had not been established by another power. Saudi Arabia argued that the British had not provided anything positive to the area and that the people wanted to affirm their connection to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, furthermore, has experience governing nomadic peoples, and the Saudi State respected the Bedouin way of life. The British saw it as "savage."⁶¹ The fact that 'Abd al-Aziz himself looked to settle Bedouin to help consolidate his rule as far back at the 1920s and that the Saudi government continued to devise settlement programs during the dispute failed to make it into the "official" history presented by the government.⁶² A true understanding of area tribes and "traditional loyalties," the Saudis argued, is almost unknowable to most Westerners who must visit the region to appreciate Bedouin culture. There was, the argument went, a centuries-old cultural, religious, political, and economic unity between Saudi Arabia and the Buraymi Oasis.⁶³

Rentz and the Saudi government argued that Buraymi's link to the Saud dynasty dated to the mid-eighteenth century. The history offered for arbitration argues that the Arabian Peninsula's past is one of nearly consistent Saud family reign, since Muhammad ibn Saud in 1765.⁶⁴ This modern Saudi government in the making, as it is described, well before such states would have been in existence, established residence in the disputed region and collected taxes from area tribes. The Saudis argued, "The continuity of the Saudi State has been preserved intact during the past two centuries," remaining "in the hearts of the people," even when formal control eroded.⁶⁵ The fact that no Saudi state of any kind existed until the twentieth century seems an inconvenience, at best. This historical reality was ignored as the oil company constructed a more usable past for the monarchy's diplomatic maneuverings. By the twentieth century, Rentz argued, Buraymi was all but independent, if somewhat tied to various rulers along the Trucial Coast. Rentz marshaled evidence from travelers who described the oasis as independent and others who suggested the region relied on the Saudi monarchy for protection and paid tribute to Saudi tax collectors into the 1930s. With Rentz's work, Aramco bolstered the Saudi monarchy's claims by providing historical foundations of continuing influence in the region and the basis of the Saudi legal claim at arbitration.⁶⁶ Rentz's history, however, embellished the nature

and extent of Saudi control and permanence on the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, most histories of the region placed the oasis outside Saudi control.⁶⁷

Aramco executives attempted to distance the company from the dispute publicly, but they maintained their interest in the possibility of more oil resources. Britain and Saudi Arabia began working on the organization of an arbitration agreement, one that allowed for continued oil exploration by the IPC. This stipulation worried Aramco executives.⁶⁸ Company vice president James Terry Duce stated Aramco's position that these activities actually exacerbated the dispute, and that the company had not entered the region since 1949.⁶⁹ He continued to assert that the company had no interest in the area and had no intent to search for oil there. The company's holdings, he asserted, were "already sufficiently large."⁷⁰ But as both U.S. and British diplomats knew, Aramco consistently protected its concession and its role as the sole oil company in Saudi Arabia, neither of which it planned to relinquish easily.⁷¹ Duce told British and American diplomats what they wanted to hear, while at the same time he assured the Saudi monarchy of the company's real intention to support its claims and produce Saudi oil. When asked about Duce's statements to the British, Vice President Floyd Ohliger claimed ignorance. He stated emphatically that Aramco would not surrender any concession rights and, moreover, would be delighted to explore Buraymi for oil.⁷²

Aramco's attempts to define the eastern frontiers of Arabia were a result of two of the company's primary interests: extending its concessionary rights and providing diplomatic support to the Saudi monarchy. While Duce and Ohliger acted as double agents, of a sort, they consistently voiced the company's support for Saudi interests to the monarchy. The identity of the company as an independent actor—with American ties—could not be questioned following the Buraymi dispute. The foundation for this identity emerged through a complex set of actions and representations, all of which served to establish the company as a partner in Saudi nation-building. The dispute, however, shed light on an emerging problem in the Middle East. Colonialism, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said to President Eisenhower in 1954, no longer posed the same threat. What had replaced it was "oilism," and Aramco represented one of its most powerful and influential midcentury agents.⁷³

Aramco's diplomatic support for Saudi boundary claims, combined with its rhetorical strategies, forged the company's position as an independent agent in Saudi Arabia.⁷⁴ Creating a positive image was a corporate strategy that allowed the company to legitimate its social and moral role.⁷⁵ Aramco sought to be much more than a foreign oil enterprise, but its primary objective remained protecting its concession and future profits. To do so, it projected an image to the world and the Saudi monarchy that it was a partner in Saudi nation-building. In the end, Aramco's vision did more

than promote partnership. It required it. And Aramco marshaled its Relations Department to the king's side in hopes of expanding its resource base.

NOTES

1. James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Matthew Connelly, "Seeing Beyond the State: The Population Control Movement and the Problem of Sovereignty," *Past & Present* 193 (November 2006): 197–233; Erez Manela, "Pox on Your Narrative: Writing Disease Control into Cold War History," *Diplomatic History* 34 (April 2010): 299–323. Many others have been working to incorporate nongovernmental actors in the story of U.S. foreign relations. See also John Gripenotrog, "The Transnational Pastime: Baseball and American Perceptions of Japan in the 1930s," *Diplomatic History* 34 (April 2010): 247–73; Daniel Maul, "'Help Them Move the ILO Way': The International Labor Organization and the Modernization Discourse in the Era of Decolonization and the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 33 (June 2009): 375–86; Jason Pribilsky, "Development and the 'Indian Problem' in the Cold War Andes: *Indigenismo*, Science, and Modernization in the Making of the Cornell–Peru Project at Vicos," *Diplomatic History* 33 (June 2009): 387–404.

2. I use the term "transnational" to describe the Arabian American Oil Company as it denotes the way relationships operate above, below, beyond, and through traditional notions of the nation-state. See Ian Tyrrell, "Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice," *Journal of Global History* 4 (2009): 453–74; Melani McAlister, "What Is Your Heart For? Affect and Internationalism in the Evangelical Public Sphere," *American Literary History* 20 (Winter 2008): 870–95; David Thelen, "The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History—An Introduction," *Journal of American History* 86 (December 1999): 965–75.

3. Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

4. Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991); David Painter, *Oil and the American Century: The Political Economy of U.S. Foreign Oil Policy, 1941–1954* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Aaron David Miller, *Search for Security: Saudi Arabian Oil and American Foreign Policy, 1939–1949* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); see also Michael B. Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security: The Search for a Nation Policy on Foreign Oil, 1941–1947* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Irvine H. Anderson, *Aramco, the United States, and Saudi Arabia: A Study of the Dynamics of Foreign Oil Policy, 1933–1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Stephen J. Randall, *United States Foreign Oil Policy, 1919–1948: For Profits and Security* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985).

5. For a discussion of how narratives call into question widely held beliefs, see Andrew Menard, "Striking a Line through the Great American Desert," *Journal of American Studies* 45 (Summer 2010): 1–14.

6. James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 15; see also James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006);

Margaret R. Somers, "Narrativity, Narrative Identity, and Social Action: Rethinking English Working-Class Formation," *Social Science History* 16 (Winter 1992): 604.

7. Roy Lebkicher, *Handbooks for American Employees*, vol. 1, part 1, *Aramco and World Oil*, rev. ed. (New York: Russell F. Moore Company, 1952), publisher's preface.

8. Lebkicher, *Handbooks for American Employees*, 26.

9. Clarence J. McIntosh to McIntosh family, March 1–2, 1944, Clarence J. McIntosh Papers, box 2, folder 8, Georgetown University Special Collections, Washington, D.C.

10. The handbook was again published in 1952 and then updated versions emerged in 1960, 1968, and 1980.

11. Lebkicher, *Handbooks for American Employees*, ii.

12. *Ibid.*, iv.

13. *Ibid.*, 2–7.

14. Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

15. Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

16. Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*; William E. Mulligan, Biographical Information on George Rentz, box 1, folder 53, Mulligan Papers.

17. Jones, *Desert Kingdom*.

18. Lebkicher, *Handbooks for American Employees*, preface; the material in the original 1950 handbook was also published, in a reorganized fashion, as *The Arabia of Ibn Saud* and distributed to a broader audience upon request.

19. Wallace Stegner, *Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil*, as abridged for *Aramco World Magazine* (Beirut: Middle East Export Press, 1971), 1.

20. Roland Marchand, *Creating a Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*; Margaret R. Somers, "Narrativity, Narrative Identity, and Social Action: Rethinking English Working-Class Formation," *Social Science History* 16 (Winter 1992): 604; David E. Nye refers to "representational strategies" that emerge to situate corporate identity. See David E. Nye, *Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1890–1930* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 152; Robert Vitalis, "Wallace Stegner's Arabian Discovery: The Imperial Entailments of Continental Vision" (working paper, "The Cold War as Global Conflict," International Center for Advanced Studies, New York University, September 2003), 2, 30; Robert Vitalis, "Black Gold, White Crude: An Essay on American Exceptionalism, Hierarchy, and Hegemony in the Gulf," *Diplomatic History* 26 (Spring 2002): 202; Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*.

21. Vitalis, "Wallace Stegner's Arabian Discovery," 2, 30; Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*.

22. Somers, "Narrativity, Narrative Identity, and Social Action," 604. David E. Nye refers to "representational strategies" that emerge to situate corporate identity. See Nye, *Image Worlds*, 152.

23. *Ibid.*, 600.

24. J. B. Kelly, *Eastern Arabian Frontiers* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), 143–45; Nathan J. Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Sa'ud, and the Making of U.S.-Saudi Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 25–26; John C. Wilkinson, *Arabia's Frontiers: The Story of Britain's Boundary Drawing in the Desert* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1991), x, 237–38; Memorandum of Conversation, Aramco officials and Judge Manley O. Hudson,

April 25, 1950, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1950), 5: 45 (hereafter cited as *FRUS* followed by appropriate year).

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26. George Rentz and William Mulligan, *The Eastern Reaches of Al-Hasa Province* (Dhahran: Arabian American Oil Company, 1950); George Rentz, *Oman and the Southern Shore of the Persian Gulf in Oman and the South-Eastern Shore of Arabia*, ed. Raghid El-Solh (1952; Berkshire, UK: Ithaca Press, 1997).

27. Research Department of the British Foreign Office, "Comment on Rentz's Book on S. E. Arabia," February 25, 1954, in *Oman and the South-Eastern Shore of Arabia*; see also Kelly, *Eastern Arabian Frontiers*.

28. Nathan J. Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Sa'ud, and the Making of U.S.-Saudi Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Tore Tingvold Petersen, "Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East: The Struggle for the Buraimi Oasis, 1952-1957," *International History Review* 14 (February 1992): 71-91.

29. Petersen, "Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East, 71-91.

30. Alexander Melamid, "The Buraimi Oasis Dispute," *Middle Eastern Affairs* 7 (1956): 56-62; Petersen, "Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East," 71-91; Rentz, *Oman and the Southern Shore of the Persian Gulf*, 115.

31. "Log of Activities—William E. Mulligan, on Exploration Field Party Liaison," April 16, 1949, folder 20, "Mulligan, William E., Correspondence, 1946-49," box 11, William E. Mulligan Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as Mulligan Papers with filing information).

32. William E. Mulligan, Memorandum, April 22, 1949, folder 20, "Mulligan, William E., Correspondence, 1946-49," box 11, Mulligan Papers.

33. Stobart to Holm, April 22, 1949, folder 20, "Mulligan, William E., Correspondence, 1946-49," box 11, Mulligan Papers.

34. Melamid, "The Buraimi Oasis Dispute," 58.

35. Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC*, 21; W. Taylor Fain, *American Ascendance and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 63; The Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) was a jointly owned subsidiary of multiple firms, among them British and American companies. Arranged in the 1920s, Standard Oil of New Jersey and Standard Oil of New York were just two of a collection of American firms that shared a 23.75 percent share. Royal Dutch/Shell (British), the Anglo Persian/Iranian Oil Company (British, with government shares), and the French company CFP each held 23.75 percent. The remaining 5 percent went to Calouste Gulbenkian, the Armenian dealmaker who negotiated the consortium. See Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991); Memorandum of Conversation, April 20, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, 5: 38.

36. Kelly, *Eastern Arabian Frontiers*, 145; Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC*, 21-26.

37. Memorandum of Conversation, January 31, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, 5: 18; Memorandum of Conversation, April 20, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, 5: v, 38; Memorandum of Conversation, April 25, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, 5: 45.

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43. Memorandum of Conversation, May 19, 1953, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 9: 1, 96, 99.
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47. Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC*, 63–64; Melamid, “The Buraimi Oasis Dispute,” 58; Tore T. Petersen, *The Middle East Between the Great Powers: Anglo-American Conflict and Cooperation, 1952–1957* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 72; Fain, *American Ascendance and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region*.
48. “Jurisdictional Dispute of Saudi Arabia,” paper prepared by the Department of State for the London Foreign Ministers Meeting in May, April 20, 1950, *FRUS, 1950*, 5: 40.
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51. Petersen, *The Middle East between the Great Powers*, 83.
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55. Fain, *American Ascendance and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region*, 67–68; quoted in Petersen, *The Middle East between the Great Powers*, 58–59.
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75. Marchand, *Creating a Corporate Soul*, 5. Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the “Improvement” of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).