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**KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA IN THE LATE  
1920-S – EARLY 1930-S: LESSONS  
FROM THE SOVIET – BRITISH COMPETITION**

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**Abstract.** A short, from a historical perspective, but extremely meaningful and impactful episode for the history of Russian/Soviet diplomacy in the Arab East, or rather dealing with the work of Soviet diplomats in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), is examined holistically in this article, following a thorough analysis of materials from the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s Archive, largely introduced into scholarly discourse for the first time here. The author’s attention is focused on the contest between the Soviet Union and the UK, which was still the most powerful western nation in Arabia, although the Kingdom had never been colonized, within the period – late 1920-s through early 1930-s – witnessing the emerging changes in history related to the nascent state set up by Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud. The period under review directly preceded such a most significant event for the bilateral relations as the 1932 visit to the Soviet Union by the KSA founder’s and ruler’s son – the governor of Hijaz and Foreign Minister of the KSA, Emir Faisal Ibn Abdul Aziz. It is shown that, although the British were actively using their foreign policy expertise to push back Moscow and prevent it from gaining power in the Kingdom, including through trade deals, the Soviet diplomats contrived to effectively leverage the feeling of good grace that the Saudis had for the Soviet Union, as a state that had never attempted to colonize the Arab world and had always treated the Arabs on an equal footing, which the British representatives could never afford. At the same time, the Soviet diplomats, like the

British, but to a lesser degree, committed mistakes in assessing the situation and in reacting to its developments, thus useful lessons can be drawn for the modern times.

**Key words:** the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UK, the USSR, the League of Nations, diplomacy, foreign trade, the Arab Federation, anglophiles, the Syrian Party, Hijaz, “kerosene debt”

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Today, some of us are prone to believe that there are no more blind spots in the history of international relations within a subsystem on the Arabian Peninsula and even in the Middle East, in general. However, a retrospective glance at the role of such a state as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), over the phase of its formation in the late 1920-s – early 1930-s, amid a complex interweaving of interests entertained by the leading global and regional powers in this subsystem, can reveal quite a lot of new aspects affecting its evolution.

It is beyond any doubt that this angle of view is quite relevant now in conjunction with all the dynamic processes that are underway in the Middle East and in Arabia, in particular. Moreover, the hybrid methodological discourse based on the scrupulous analysis of the documents from the Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation and the National Archives in Kew Gardens that I have an opportunity to offer here would help many to draw useful lessons for the modern diplomatic and political practices from the not-so-ancient past.

### ***Oil, Loans and League of Nations***

One of such lessons is the importance of making an adequate evaluation of the current situation in the country and in the subregion, based on an unbiased analysis of the fact-checked data and also on the appropriate forecast of its potential development. But first, let us refer to some of the well-known events in the Kingdom’s history at that period. There is such a huge bulk of research related to the KSA history in Russian, Arabic, English and other languages, that Russian historian Alexei Vasiliev<sup>1</sup> was even faced with the necessity to write a specific monograph carrying a list of all publications. However, this article definitely offers a totally fresh approach for the exploration of the subject.

In December 1925, Abdel Aziz bin Saud was proclaimed the King of Hijaz and Sultan of Najd and Dependent Territories, as was the name of the state established by him. The USSR was the first nation to recognize him in February 1926, and Kerim Khakimov was appointed the first chief of the Soviet mission – Diplomatic Agent and Consul General of the USSR in the Kingdom. In late 1928, he was replaced by Nazir

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<sup>1</sup> Vasil’ev A.M. Annotirovannaya bibliografiya Saudovskoj Aravii. Moscow: Izdatel’skij dom “Soglasie – XXI vek”, 2000.

Tyuryakulov, who later became Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the USSR. The Soviet diplomats working in the KSA had to tackle a large amount of tasks pertinent to the foreign policy and external economic affairs of the USSR, including the launching of Soviet products on the Saudi markets, and, similar to the present day, energy resources and foodstuffs were among the key items on the trade expansion agenda for Moscow. The USSR was in fierce competition with Western companies, primarily with the British ones, particularly in conquering the market for grain supplies, as well kerosene and other petroleum products. The UK in all areas was the chief competitor for the Soviet Union.

And now, let us consider a most vivid example illustrating what a high price one has to pay for the mistakes made in the assessment of these or those circumstances that could be a turning point in the progression of events for this or that nation involving a trajectory of a much greater scope. It was a situation in which a decisive part was played by a high-ranking British diplomat Lancelot Oliphant and his like-minded associates, who assumed that the UK participation in the oil exploration projects in the Kingdom and even in the financing of joint projects was inexpedient, which earned him the sobriquet “The diplomat who said ‘No’ to Saudi oil”. Will it be fair to certain extent to compare this with a refusal of the Soviet government to grant a commercial loan to Ibn Saud, so much needed by the Kingdom? I suppose that such a comparison would be far-fetched, given the difference in the amount of risks involved and the state of economies in each of the two nations. The Soviet refusal was a well-calculated decision that was made proceeding from a perfect understanding of real benefits and losses associated with it and an alternative stance on the matter. Perhaps, industrialization really was more vital to Moscow.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that, although Moscow was better aware of the state of affairs in the KSA than London, Soviet diplomacy was entirely free from errors. A conspicuous example is the wrong evaluation of the prospects for the accession of the Kingdom to the League of Nations. The leadership of the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (PCFA) was sure that the British had nearly pulled Ibn Saud into the League of Nations. However, Soviet diplomats were wrong. Ibn Saud had long been thinking about applying for membership into the organization and he from time to time sent out feelers to British representatives. And the question of accepting the Kingdom of Hijaz and Najd to the League of Nations, as it turns out from the British diplomatic archives, was first raised with the League’s Secretariat back in 1929, but the British government was generally opposed to advising Ibn Saud to petition the League for acceptance of his state. The King proceeded from the fact that his application would be automatically accepted, since Hijaz during the reign of Sharif Hussein was one of the founding states of the League of Nations. British plenipotentiary Andrew Ryan on July 16, 1931 in a Foreign Office dispatch asked Foreign Minister John Simon about the prospects for accepting the Kingdom into the League. The answer came only on May 17, 1933 after Saudi spokesman Hafiz Wahba<sup>1</sup>, on May 3 of the same year, formally

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<sup>1</sup> Wahba, Hafiz –foreign policy advisor of Palestinian/Egyptian origin to the King, who served also as the first Saudi ambassador to the United Kingdom.

sought the opinion of the British side during a meeting with Oliphant.

Oliphant said that, firstly, since the name of the state of Ibn Saud was different from that of the state of Hussein, the application must be filed from him as a new state. Secondly, the League may only consider bids from states with clearly demarcated borders. Oliphant referred to the agreement between the Imam of Yemen and Ibn Saud on the Asir-Yemeni border but expressed doubt that the state of the border with Transjordan could satisfy the League, since the issue of Maan-Aqaba was resolved only de facto. The Saudi-Iraqi border remained undemarked. Thirdly, in his words, the existence of slavery in the Kingdom could also be an obstacle to joining the League. It is significant that, in Simon's dispatch, the Saudi kingdom was characterized as a "primitively organized state"<sup>1</sup>. The assessment that was given to the Kingdom in Moscow was much more positive.

Debate about Ibn's Saud entry into the League of Nations did not die off quickly. Continuing to believe that the Kingdom is not ready to be accepted into the League, but given the interest shown by Ibn Saud, the British clearly decided to leverage his eagerness by pressuring the King to change those policies that they considered unacceptable.

Later the memorandum of the Foreign Office, signed by the Permanent Deputy Foreign Secretary J. G. Ward of July 30, 1935, again on the same matter, stated that Kingdom of Hijaz under Sharif Hussein was part of the founding states of the League, but since Hussein had failed to ratify the Versailles Treaty, Hijaz's membership in the League did not transpire<sup>2</sup>. After July 1930 (as it was reported in the memorandum) Fuad Hamza<sup>3</sup> "showed some interest" in his country's entry into the League, the British government considered that the unimplemented Hijaz membership of the times of Hussein did not substantiate the acceptance of Ibn Saud's due to the state's having "lost its national identity" when Hijaz found itself in a union with Najd, and especially in 1932, when the new state became "personified" and was renamed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Therefore, Ibn Saud had to petition the League with his request for acceptance "from scratch".

The memorandum identified the benefits of accepting the KSA, including, in particular, the introduction of sanitary control over pilgrimages, the development of international communications, including by air (although this "internationalization" did not quite correspond to British interests), the settlement of territorial disputes between the KSA and neighboring states, including Iraq. But the obstacles the KSA would face on the path toward acceptance were also listed, being the very same that had been addressed earlier, of which there were two primary ones. The first was the widespread domestic and industrial slavery and the unreadiness of the state to change this situation; the second, a no less serious obstacle, was the absence of officially fixed borders with

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<sup>1</sup> FO 371/19019, E 2491/840/25, May 17, 1933. P. 89–90.

<sup>2</sup> FO 371/19019, E 4666/4666/25, July 30, 1935. P. 242–244.

<sup>3</sup> Hamza, Fuad – very influential foreign policy and economic advisor of Lebanese origin to Ibn Saud, who settled in the Kingdom in the 1920s. He was playing the main role in the strategic planning of the Saudi foreign policy. Deputy minister of foreign affairs from 1930. Served as the first Saudi ambassador to France.

their neighbors (Transjordan, Yemen, the protectorates of the Persian Gulf, the Aden protectorate). And from the point of view of purely British interests, it would be unfortunate “if His Majesty’s Government would support Ibn Saud’s desire to join the League, and then problems would arise in Geneva, and the King will blame the British for his failures”.

Other downsides of London’s support for Ibn Saud’s possible entry into the League mentioned in the memorandum included the precedent that would be set for accepting a “semi-Barbaric” state (an even harsher assessment) and that Egypt would be most displeased with the fact that it remains outside the League. In connection with these and the previously mentioned extremely harsh British assessment of the Kingdom, it is worth saying that in some reports of the Foreign Office it was also called a “poor state”<sup>1</sup>. Probably, this last statement in the pre-oil era was a more fair assessment than the other ones heard from the Brits in light of the fact that the Kingdom’s only revenue source those days came from pilgrims.

### ***USSR raises the level of diplomatic representation***

Despite serious dissimilarities in state structures and the values and orientations prevailing in their societies, the two states showed great interest in developing relations with each other. In the dispatches sent to the Center, Soviet diplomats continued to sympathize with the centralization policy of Ibn Saud and called for its support. Realizing that the Kingdom is far from the Soviet Union, and aware of the specificity of Arabian society, even those loose cannons among revolutionaries who tried to ignite revolution in several countries of the East still did not intend to interfere in the internal affairs of the Kingdom, which created a good basis for mutual understanding. Ibn Saud, in turn, needed his international positions to strengthen and the existence of a counterweight of sorts to Britain, a roll which Russia played well, and who was also a good trading partner. The King was impressed by the fact that Moscow built relations with him on an equal basis, without trying to dictate policy to him, as London often did. The quiet development of relations was also promoted by the fact neither of the states had vital interests at stake.

By 1931, newly appointed Soviet plenipotentiary Nazir Tyuryakulov who arrived in Jeddah earlier, in December 1928, not only maintained business contacts with Saudi officials and foreign representatives in the Kingdom established by his predecessor, but also brought them to a new level, as well as making his own efforts to meet new people. His negotiations with the Saudis on two treaties – on friendship and trade – had been difficult and constantly broke down. On March 4, 1931, the plenipotentiary reported from Jeddah about a conversation he had with Yusuf Yassin<sup>2</sup>, who at the time of Fuad Hamza’s illness served as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (young son of the King, Emir Faisal was then the Minister). During the conversation, the plenipotentiary told

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<sup>1</sup> FO 371/19019, E 2491/840/25, May 17, 1933. P. 89–90.

<sup>2</sup> Yassin, Yusuf, Saudi diplomat and journalist of Syrian origin, who settled in the Kingdom in the 1920s, one of the architects of the Saudi foreign policy.

Yassin the story of the negotiations that were held in 1929 with Hamza, where the latter was presented a draft treaty of friendship between the two countries.

On December 14 of the same year, Hamza told the plenipotentiary that “the project was met with sympathy, that the exclusive regime created for the joint trading in Hijaz is being liquidated and that the Hijaz government is ready to negotiate with us on trade agreement issues”<sup>1</sup>. Following this, the plenipotentiary, at the suggestion of Hamza, formulated a proposal for a trade agreement. However, the negotiations were actually interrupted due to Hamza’s departure to meet with Ibn Saud and Faisal in February 1930. After the break, Hamza (naturally, on the instructions of the King) put a number of conditions on the Soviet side, and not having the Soviets any meaningful answer, and new break in talks ensued due to Hamza’s illness. Now the plenipotentiary put two questions before Yassin. Firstly, is the King still ready for formalizing the relations of the two countries and, secondly, who will be authorized to negotiate with the Soviet side in place of Hamza. In turn, Yassin asked Tyuryakulov if the Soviet side could accept Hijaz’s proposals either in whole or in part. To this he was told that the answer would be given to him in writing<sup>2</sup>. It seems that both sides were somehow stretching out these negotiations, although it seemed that Moscow’s instructions required more vigorous actions.

It was at this time the parties finally agreed to raise the diplomatic representation of the USSR in the Kingdom to the level of a full-fledged mission: the Diplomatic Agent and the Consul General became the Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary. On February 26, 1930 in Mecca, he presented his credential letters to the Governor of the King, Emir Faisal, stressing in his speech that he would rely on the two countries’ “strong affection and supportive relations,” which was bestowed upon him by the King, the Emir and other authorities. The plenipotentiary stated that “the purpose of the present appointment is to fortify and strengthen the friendly relations that have been established between the two countries and to the mutual satisfaction of both parties.” In response, the Emir said: “I have no doubt that today we are entering a new era in relations between our countries, and this lays a solid foundation for friendship between us”<sup>3</sup>. The reorganization of the mission was another plus for Moscow. As Tyuryakulov reported in a letter to Deputy Commissar for Foreign Affairs Lev Karakhan dated March 10, now “according to the order established recently by the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Hijaz Government, seniority among all diplomatic corps belongs to us”<sup>4</sup>.

And then the head of the mission explained: “The main reason that prompted me to hurry with the presentation of credential letters was the consideration of seniority. It became known only over the last days about the King’s in a month (and even then conditionally). Knowing Fuad Hamza, I had every reason to expect from him all sorts of ‘tricks’... From my memorandum you will see that we are now entering a new phase, characterized by an improvement in Soviet-Hijaz relations.” Nazir Bey was right: this

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<sup>1</sup> Tyuryakulov to Karakhan. Foreign Affairs Archive of the RF. Fd. 127. Inv. 1. F. 7. M. 94. P. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. P. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Foreign Affairs Archive of the RF. Fd. 190. Inv. 9. Pf. 5. F. 4. Pp. 28-29.

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Affairs Archive of the RF. Fd. 08. Inv. 13. M. 65. P. 43.

momentous time had arrived, but, unfortunately, contrary to his hopes, it turned out to be very short.

Unfortunately, Moscow's successful trade activities with countries on the Arabian Peninsula were hampered by the sluggishness and incompetence of foreign trade Soviet organizations, elements of corruption and inter-departmental squabbling. The extracts from the Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgiy Chicherin's "will-letter" from 1930 (this secret private document was originally written for Valerian Kuybishev whom Chicherin recommended to be his successor but the person who was appointed turned out to be his personal enemy Maksim Litvinov) demonstrate this most clearly: "The PCTrade<sup>1</sup> is our internal enemy in Asia. Persia covers Baku, Turkey – the Caucasus in general; areas that could be entirely bought politically with trade concessions. But no! Our trade reps rip off the Turkish and Persian people blind. Shumyatsky made all of Persia our enemies with his shameless way of doing business, by robbing the Persians, together with the super-speculators Busheri<sup>2</sup> and Gaig. All this was headed by Frumkin. When in Persia wormdrivers (camel drivers) at the place of departure were either given under-poured or wet sugar, and at their destination they were fined for it, generally, in every way possible they were duped and robbed (all this was established by the auditing commission), and they refused to work for us, trade representative Comrade Goldberg denounced this activity: 'As a result of Britain's chicanery, the wormdrivers refuse to work for us.' The 'mixed (or seemingly mixed) societies created by Shumyatsky, who were thoroughly saturated with dishonest trade intentions and imperialist attitudes towards the Persians, were the main tool of our attempts to economically enslave Persia and paid Britain a huge service. Comrade Kaktyn's report, although illiterately and evasively written in terms of diplomacy, about his trip to Turkey and Persia helped us. While working with Comrade Kamenev, Comrade Frumkin himself became softer, and with the assistance of Comrade Schleifer, we jointly agreed a plan on how we would trade with the Middle East<sup>3</sup>.

Comrade Mikoyan at first introduced a fresh, lively approach toward the affairs of trade, but then he poured himself into high politics, which allowed the lower and middle ranks of the PCTrade, now saturated with the fine traditions of dishonest trade, to grow stronger in influence. During my absence, contact with the PCTrade has significantly lessened. The import plan is of enormous political importance, as in which country should receive our preference; it is crucial that it be drawn up collaboratively. According to an old provision of NCTrade, a trade representative is appointed by agreement with the PCFA<sup>4</sup>, and there were no conflicts because of this; Comrade Krasin thanked me many times for sharing with him the particular qualities of various people, both known and unknown to me. In 1928, in the new position of PCFT<sup>5</sup>, this clause dis-

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<sup>1</sup> People's Commissariat for Trade.

<sup>2</sup> Busheri, Moin al-Tojjar – Persian entrepreneur and merchant.

<sup>3</sup> Probably referring to the resolution of the Politburo of the Central Committee of August 12, 1926 "On Trade Policy with the Countries of the East."

<sup>4</sup> People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.

<sup>5</sup> People's Commissariat for Foreign Trade.

appeared, and my retirement prevented me from seeing this battle to its end. Trade representatives are of such enormous political importance that coordination of their appointments with the PCFA is absolutely necessary”<sup>1</sup>.

### *Soviet mission is intensifying contacts and analyzing information*

Naturally, the plenipotentiary transferred to the PCFA general political information of considerable interest to the Center, which he received during meetings with senior Saudi officials. For example, the plenipotentiary asked Yassin about the “Arab Federation,” the possibility of creating while the press wrote a lot about at this time, referring to the statement of Nuri al-Said<sup>2</sup>. It created the impression that “the issue had entered a discussion phase between the respective governments.” Yassin’s answer completely refuted this version: “As Arabs, we have always been fundamentally supportive of the unity of the Arabs. We understand the concept of unity more broadly than a federation. If business depended only on us, we would like to merge all Arab countries – Iraq, Transjordan, Yemen, etc. But we are talking about theory and our wishes... It is necessary that this idea came from the depths of the Arab society itself. We cannot create a valid federation just by signing some documents... I swear that we did not receive any proposals to create a federation”<sup>3</sup>.

The hype in the press surrounding the imaginary plans for the creation of a federation also worried Ibn Saud himself. The Turkish Chargé d’Affaires in the Kingdom, Seni Bey, with whom Tyuryakulov had established a particularly trusting relationship (although he gave him a negative assessment), told the Soviet plenipotentiary about a conversation with the King that took place on March 4, 1931. The Arab ruler “nervously spoke about unscrupulous people and the shameless press who, due to their own special interests, make a lot of noise about an Arab Federation as a way to earn political capital”<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless, during meetings with various political figures the envoy was looking for confirmation that Ibn Saud did not intend to participate in the plans of the Iraqi rulers, who were backed by the British. It was necessary to find out with what the nature of Nuri al-Said’s visit with Ibn Saud was and discover what answer he received, which was significant politically and in terms of protocol. Tyuryakulov’s April 13, 1931 characterization of the Persian representative in the Kingdom of Ain ul-Mulk speaks of a “ill-advised move” he made. He was at a dinner in honor of Nuri-pasha hosted by Ryan

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<sup>1</sup> Chicherin, “will-letter.”

<sup>2</sup> Al-Said, Nuri (1887–1958) is an Iraqi military, state and political figure known for pro-British views. He served in the Ottoman Army, participated in the anti-Turkish uprising led by Sharif Hussein, in the army of Hussein’s son Faisal led the troops who took Damascus. He returned to Iraq, became the first Police Chief, in 1930–1958 intermittently served as Prime Minister of Iraq eight times, in 1955 was one of the initiators of the creation of the Baghdad Pact. He was killed during the July anti-monarchist revolution in Iraq in 1958, his body was torn to pieces by the crowd.

<sup>3</sup> Tyuryakulov to Karakhan. Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 0127.Inv. 1. F. 108. M. 3. P. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 0127. Inv. 1. F. 7. M. 95. P. 6.



(naturally, the Soviet plenipotentiary was not invited “due to lack of space in the dining room”), the Persian stated that the next day he and Seni Bey would see off Nuri-pasha. The angry Turk, “saving face for Ain ul-Mulk,” arrived at 10 o’clock on the pier, but did not find anyone there: both the local authorities and the Persian representative were late, and then everyone was waiting for the Iraqi, who arrived an hour and a half late. Nuri-pasha came with Ryan and, without apologizing, walked directly onto the steamboat<sup>1</sup>.

Resolving protocol issues required a good understanding of the general political situation in the region, caution and, at the same time, flexibility; and occasionally without waiting for the Center’s instructions. The same Ain ul-Mulk also put the plenipotentiary in an awkward position, insisting that the representatives of the USSR, Turkey and Persia meet Amanullah, who was visiting Saudi Arabia, because “after all he is a former King to whom we held in high regard”<sup>2</sup>. There were no instructions yet, but the plenipotentiary, believed that he should avoid attending the meeting stemming from the fact that the Saudi government, under which the mission was accredited, kept silent on the matter. It was impossible to officially meet the ex-King of Afghanistan, and a private meeting was inappropriate, since the plenipotentiary was not personally acquainted with Amanullah. Ain ul-Mulk fervently objected, recalling how he met the former Afghan monarch in Beirut and showed him the appropriate signs of respect. The plenipotentiary discussed the situation with Seni Bey, finding out that he supported the Soviet position and not that of the Persian representative. But it was not possible to persuade the Persian. He then stated that he would not go to meet Amanullah, but would arrange a private meeting with later. Tyuryakulov stood firmly on his position: it was clear that a meeting with Amanulla would have caused an angry reaction from the side of the leader of Kabul, Nader Shah.

On April 18, Ain ul-Mulk informed the plenipotentiary of Amanullah’s visit to Jeddah with his retinue and said that such serious issues as a meeting with the Afghan ex-King should be decided at meetings of the diplomatic corps. The Soviet plenipotentiary reasonably stated that for this, the Persian must appeal to him with a proposal to convene such an assembly, and should indicate the issues that will be discussed. The dispute did not end there: Ain ul-Mulk stated that he would convene a meeting in his house, after which Tyuryakulov retorted that he would not go to such a meeting. And at a meeting on April 19, the Persian representative told the Soviet plenipotentiary that Afghanistan was restless, Amanullah has many supporters there, Moscow supposedly treats Nader Shah “with suspicion”, and the Shah “seeks to restore the position that existed under Emir Habibullah Khan” Tyuryakulov indicated to the Persian that all this was unknown to him, and the Soviet-Afghan relations were quite normal<sup>3</sup>. Permanent altercations between Soviet and Persian representatives showed that it was not at all easy for Moscow to pursue Moscow’s close cooperation with Persia and Turkey altogether. In

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<sup>1</sup> Tyuryakulov to Karakhan. Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 0127. Inv. 1. F. 7. M. 95. P. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. P. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Tyuryakulov to Karakhan. Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 0127. Inv. 1. F. 7. M. 95. Pp. 26-27.

addition, as always happens in such cases, personal agency-related issues played a big role: Ain ul-Mulk's disposition towards the Soviet mission was clearly not friendly.

Regularly maintaining contact with the Soviet mission, local Ministry of Finance official, Circassian by origin, a friend to the Soviet mission, Dr. Salih, continued to share highly confidential information. In an interview with the plenipotentiary on April 17, 1931, he noted the recklessness of many of the Hijaz government's expenditures: "In addition to placing orders for an infinite number of cars on credit and increasing the government's debt to foreigner creditors, £5,000 were transferred to the Hijaz envoy in London, Hafiz Wahba, for holding a coronation banquet on January 8. Fuad Hamza received £1,000 for medical treatment. Excessive spending and misappropriation of funds were not punishable. Ministry of Health cannot explain a shortage of £4,000 in its books, brushed over the case citing the "grace" of Ibn Saud. £15,000 worth medications were ordered, but only £5,000 worth arrived, the rest caught on fire. Even in light of all this, the Syrians<sup>1</sup> were able get situated: Ibn Saud confidentially handed out a strict order to pay wages first to those doctors who were under contract by the Hijaz government"<sup>2</sup>.

Both the British and Soviet diplomats made mistakes in the understanding the balance of power in the Saudi leadership. The British believed that several very influential figures of Syrian origin surrounding the King were inspired by the ideas of Arab nationalism. They were the group that maintained close contact with the Soviets. As Bond wrote to George Rendel: "This party is led, as you know, by Yusuf Yassin and Fuad Hamza, who are at present on very friendly terms with the Soviet Agency and have recently, I'm credibly informed, been urging the King to allow free commercial intercourse between Russia and the Hijaz"<sup>3</sup>. A number of British diplomats presumed that the Syrians' fondness noted by their colleagues for the Soviet representation was not based on ideological reasons, but rather on purely practical calculations. In particular, Butler reported: "Fuad Hamza, the leader of the Syrian party, which is on good terms with the Soviet Agency for reasons of its own, is, according to what Mr. Jenkins<sup>4</sup> told us the other day, almost all-powerful in Hejaz for a considerable part of the year, when Ibn Saud is away at Riyadh in Eastern Nejd."<sup>5</sup> Later, another diplomat, the British envoy in the Kingdom, Andrew Ryan, gave a far less monotone assessment of Hamza in a letter to Foreign Minister Sir John Simon:<sup>6</sup> "Fuad Bey Hamza... has two personalities...; One is saturated with the feelings of Arab nationalism, while Fuad serves Ibn Saud, alt-

<sup>1</sup> Group of influential Arab nationalists in the Saudi leadership.

<sup>2</sup> Tyuryakulov to Karakhan. Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 0127. Inv. 1. F. 7. M. 95. P. 25.

<sup>3</sup> From Bond to G.W. Rendel, FO 371/13732, E 2222/381/91. P. 4–5.

<sup>4</sup> K.J. Jenkins was at the time British Chargé d'Affaires in Jeddah.

<sup>5</sup> From Butler, FO 371/13732, E 2222/381/91, 10 July 1929. P. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Simon, Sir John Allsebrook, (1873–1954) – a prominent British statesman, in 1915–1916 was Home Secretary and after the First World War became one of the leaders of the Liberals, and in 1931 became the head of the National Liberal Party close to the conservatives. In 1931–1935 Foreign Secretary in the Government of Ramsay MacDonald, in 1935–1937, Home Secretary, in 1937 became Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Government of N. Chamberlain, in May 1940 Lord Chancellor in the Office of W. Churchill, retired in 1945.

though he does not enjoy the full confidence of his master and does not fully share his views. But for the time being he sees him as the best incarnation of the Arab idea...<sup>1</sup>.

The British did not know this, but as odd as it was, Nazir Tyuryakulov at the same time held an opinion different than the British about the political orientation of Hamza, who was considered the de facto head of the foreign affairs department of the Kingdom, seeing him more as the main anglophile in the Saudi leadership and his opponent. For the breakdown of the Soviet-Saudi negotiations, he blamed the “influential Anglo-Saudi group,” which he called “the Ryan-Philby-Hamza Team”<sup>2</sup>. Tyuryakulov wrote to Moscow that “the Anglophile clique of Fuad Hamza continued to dominate the government apparatus and that Hamza’s appointment as the representative of Hijaz for negotiations with the Soviet representatives in addition to having a formal basis, made tactical sense in that the King in one swoop removed the blame we placed on him for not wanting to become closer, and by placing these negotiations under the actual control of the British, he was removing any responsibility he felt toward them”<sup>3</sup>.

Among those British diplomats who did not consider it right to attribute the leaders of the Syrian nationalists in the Saudi elite to being supporters of communist ideology, was Bond. At the same time, he believed that the “Syrian party” hoped to use relations with the USSR for the realization of its goals: “I imagine too that the Syrian party as a whole would be loth to antagonize Bolshevism altogether and thus lose the potential utility of the latter in the Hejaz for furthering the cause of Syrian nationalism”. Recognizing the fact that the Syrian Party supported the positions of the USSR in the Kingdom, first of all by trying to open the Hijaz market for Soviet goods, Bond concludes that they were unsuccessful due to the erroneous actions of the Soviet diplomats and foreign trade representatives: “So far, though not without a struggle, the Syrian party has failed to improve the Soviet position; witness the cause of the “S.S. Tomp” and various other rebuffs administered to the Bolsheviks. Owing to the faulty tactics on the part of the Soviet agency, it and the Syrian party have come against the united opinion of the Jeddah merchants led by the Governor and these are still certain to offer strenuous opposition to the grant of any facilities to Russian trade”<sup>4</sup>.

### *Problems of the oil deal*

The plenipotentiary gave his undivided attention to the issue of the “oil deal”. On June 7, 1931, the mission sent a subordinate of plenipotentiary, Stepan Matyushkin, to Moscow with a transcript of negotiations on this deal, which Tyuryakulov was conducting in Mecca, where the plenipotentiary had already spent five days<sup>5</sup>. The plenipoten-

<sup>1</sup> From Ryan to Simon, March 11, 1935. FO 371/13734, E 1637/318/25. P. 1.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Tyuryakulov – Karakhan, January 1, 1929; cit. by: Mansurov, T. Nazir Tyuryakulov - plenipotentiary of the USSR in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Moscow: Russky Raritet, 2000. P. 171.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. P. 178.

<sup>4</sup> From Bond to G.W. Rendel, FO 371/13732, E 2222/381/91. P. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Hereinafter: Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 0127. Inv. 1. F. 7. M. 95. P. 20.

tiary reached the following conclusion: the deal for the Saudis is not so much a commercial matter as a political one. Dr. Salih, who was, in fact, the “mouthpiece of the Ministry of Finance,” said that a group of influential merchants had been organized around Finance Minister Abdullah Suleyman and Comptroller Seyid Hashim, who hoped that this would open up the road for other goods to arrive from the USSR. These traders expected to become intermediaries and commissioners on the sales of Soviet goods. At the same time, an “Anglophile” group of traders tried to thwart the deal. In this regard, the plenipotentiary considered it necessary to closely monitor the “tactics of the ministry of Fuad Hamza, “who did everything possible to ensure the transaction went through him. Tyuryakulov through Hamza passed on to the King the transaction terms that had been received from Moscow, including prices. Returning from Ta’if, where Hamza and Suleyman met with the King, Hamza told the plenipotentiary that the Hijaz government “considers these prices not low enough and they are asking for even larger price reductions, moreover, he put forward from his side really absurd conditions regarding a loan.”

According to diplomats, this was an attempt to either disrupt or delay negotiations and, what’s more, Hamza had hoped to provoke discontent among the “individual circles.” The plenipotentiary even wondered whether the Hijaz government was even interested in a deal with the Soviet side or not. But Dr. Salih, after a conversation with Seyid Hashim, told Soviet diplomats that he and minister of finance Abdullah Suleyman wrote a letter to Ibn Saud, “in which they expressed suspicion about the behavior of Fuad. The letter stated that Fuad was dragging the deal and taking the initiative, which was not in the interests of Hijaz, but in Britian’s political interests”. In addition, Salih told the Soviet diplomat that Seyid Hashim invited him to attend his conversation with the British Vice-Consul, Ihsanullah. There was nothing surprising in the fact that the Englishman expressed dissatisfaction with the planned oil deal between the Hijaz government and the Soviet Union.

The more general conversations the diplomats had with Finance Minister Abdullah Suleyman were of great importance. During Tyuryakulov’s brief absence his Chargé d’Affaires, Horace Zalkind,<sup>1</sup> who replaced him, reported in his recording of a conversation he had had with Matyushkin on October 19, 1931. “In connection with the imminent departure of the Ministry of Finance to Riyadh to meet with the King, I asked him to accept me. The meeting took place on his arrival in Jeddah on 19 / X - 31. He accepted me and Comrade Matyushkin with emphasized courtesy...” Zalkind noted the importance of friendly relations between the USSR and the countries of the Muslim East, but also recalled several unfriendly acts of some of them, that the Soviet Union does not respond like those that come from Western countries. “I cited Britain as an example,” wrote Zalkind, “which after having broken off relations with us was then forced as a result of the reduction in trade turnover to restore these relations again. He pointed out that France, who had received pushback due to their attempt to boycott So-

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<sup>1</sup> Zalkind, Horace Abramovich (1898–1938) – Soviet diplomat, who arrived at the embassy on September 1, 1931 as Chargé d’affaires in connection with Tyuryakulov’s departure for sick leave (he arrived in Moscow on September 3). He stayed in Jeddah only about six months. Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 0127. Inv. 1. F. 7. M. 95 Pp. 30–32.

viet goods, is now forced to seek a trade agreement with us. In relation to Hijaz, we acted differently, because we believed that these unfriendly acts were occurring either out of ignorance or as a result of bad advice given to the Hijaz government. We responded with a profitable deal for the latter, which showed that the Soviet Government intended to conduct a friendly policy towards them and that the line of conduct taken by the Hijaz government was not in its own interests”<sup>1</sup>. After such a preamble, the diplomat turned to the gist of his notes: “I indicated that under present conditions it is difficult for the Soviet government to recommend to commercial organizations that they establish long-term relations with the Hijaz government, because there is no basis on which these relations can be built.” To do this, Zalkind explained, that the Hijaz government should conclude agreements “that would be in the interests of these organizations.”

The reaction of the minister was telling. He noted “that he had already submitted a report to the King about the need to conclude a friendly political and trade agreement, that today or tomorrow he will travel to Riyadh to report to the King and that he is sure that in five or six days he will bring back a message from the King ordering Emir Faisal to officially notify the Soviet Embassy about the readiness of the Hijaz government to begin negotiations on concluding the above-mentioned treaty”<sup>2</sup>. It sounded optimistic, although, if you look carefully, the Saudi position in fact could remain unchanged – after all, these were only negotiations, during which the Saudis pushed their own agenda and with the same persistence as always, including a request to provide trade financing. A Soviet diplomat asked the Minister to convey to the King a request for Suleyman to take part in the negotiations, but he modestly remarked, as Eastern etiquette demanded, that he personally did not feel competent enough for that.

Zalkind was only temporarily sent to Jeddah. The note sent to the Governor of the King, Emir Faisal stated in part: “In connection with the sick leave of the Emergency Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister of the USSR in the Kingdom of Hijaz, Najd and the Dependencies, Mr. Nazir Tyuryakulov, wishing the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, to be duly represented when discussing and issues that are currently under negotiation, has appointed as his Deputy Mr. Horace Zalkind as the Chargé d’Affaires for the duration of his sick leave”<sup>3</sup>.

Let us introduce some additional interesting data from the diaries of Zalkind. During a meeting on November 28, 1931, the Turkish Chargé d’Affaires Lutfullah Bey informed his Soviet counterpart that the relationship between Fuad Hamza and Yusuf Yassin was “not good”, and that “Philby’s<sup>4</sup> role is over.” The government’s financial situation is problematic, there is “absolutely no money”. On the instructions of the King, Yasin negotiated with some Dutch banks for a loan off £ 500,000 but the banks imposed an unacceptable for the Saudis requirement that they have control over cus-

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<sup>1</sup> Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 0127. Inv. 1. F. 7. M. 95 P. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Zalkind’s diary entries for October 1931 - February 1932; see: Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 0127. Inv. 2. F. 9. M. 3. Pp. 1–7.

<sup>3</sup> Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 127. Inv. 1. Pf. 37. F. 3. P. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Philby, Harry St John (1885–1960) – famous British colonial administrator, explorer of Arabia, writer, King’s advisor.

toms and expenditure of funds. Another source said that a few months ago, the government bought “via a Polish dealer” a batch of 10,000 units of rifles in Czechoslovakia, and each gun cost about £4 in gold, despite the fact that their usual price was £7. Naturally, such guns only could be fired before they stopped working due to jammed springs. Zalkind, at a meeting with Lutfalla on December 7, asked about the participation of Hijaz in a conference on disarmament and received an answer that their envoy in London would represent the country, but the Saudi government had not yet developed its position on disarmament. At a meeting with the French Chargé d’Affaires, Megré on December 9, Zalkind surprisingly asked what he thought about Hijaz separatism. The Frenchman said that Hijaz “would gladly have separated from Najd, but they don’t have the numbers to manage this. 50 Najdis with one Corporal would be enough to restore full order”.

Contemporary Russian researcher Aleksandr Yakovlev notes that Chargé d’Affaires “did not know Arabic (Matyushkin served as a translator) and somewhat looked down on the Saudis. Zalkind fully adhered to the Soviet political course, but did not achieve any results. Hints of arrogance and disregard for poor Arabia are felt in his diary entries”<sup>1</sup>.

It seems that Moscow did not attach much importance to the event, which was later destined to radically change the fate of the Kingdom. In 1931, an American millionaire by the name of Crane agreed to grant Ibn Saud a loan to search for water and mineral resources, and an American agent, Karl Twitchell, received a license to conduct exploration in the Al-Hasa region.

### ***The PCFA demands that the plenipotentiary produce more results***

Despite the effervescence that Tyuryakulov applied to his work and his undeniable diplomatic successes, the leadership of the PCFA demanded more from him. Of course, some “system-related” constructive criticisms from the leadership are inevitable. Note that Kerim Khakimov, when he was the Agent and Consul General, the PCFA reproached him for his untimely replies to their requests. On May 31, 1927, in a letter to the diplomatic agent, the leadership of the Middle East Desk remarked<sup>2</sup>: “We would like to draw your attention that in the current situation, more than at any other time, it is imperative that you highlight the most pressing issues in telegraph correspondence. Mail exchange occurs very infrequently, and it is absolutely necessary that, upon receipt of mail, you telegraphically answer the most important questions that are the subject of our correspondence. Establishing a quick and regular connection between you and the PCFA in this new environment is the primary objective”. Further, regarding a memorandum sent previously by the head of the Consulate in Ahvaz, Pletukhin, to Khakimov on the expansion of this consulate’s work on Arab matters, it was stated: “We are waiting for your views on the issue raised by Comrade Pletukhin. At the same time, we would like to receive from you a special note summarizing what we have accomplished in the Arab countries through the Jeddah Agency and outlining the prospects for further work in these countries.” The Middle East Desk’s leadership also not-

<sup>1</sup> Yakovlev. Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 0127. Inv. 1. F. 4. M. 44. P. 25.

ed some other shortcomings: “Please send us a list of Arab and European publications received by the Agency. Being in the dark about what print sources of information the Agency uses, we cannot figure out for ourselves exactly what informational materials should be included in our mailing briefs, during the preparation of which we would like to take into account the interests of the Agency. At present, we have launched a compilation of a general calendar of the PCFA. In view of this, it is necessary for the Agency to send us a short recap of its work (official negotiations and correspondence)”. The Desk also wanted the mission to be more actively involved in the actual development of theses for tackling the main issues of the USSR’s Arab policy.

Nevertheless, the fact that already by 1929 Tyuryakulov was quite seriously reproached for the poor quality of his information-gathering work, testified either to his actual omissions in timely informing the Center and fulfilling its instructions, or to deficiencies in the organization of how information was passed on, or simply that Tyuryakulov had not yet fully justified the hopes placed on him by the leadership. A letter written by Lev Karakhan on May 21, 1929 said the following: “You are insufficiently informing us about what is going on in Arabia. Your telegrams are followed by large pauses while the situation in recent times is literally replete with new moments, the evaluations of which are not received from you. In addition, the last post, despite being a well-developed theoretical note, in the sense of detailed and factual material left much to be desired”. And then the main claim against the plenipotentiary: “The main omission is that you did not send us your diary, which should be kept regularly and with the greatest possible completeness, taking into account all the information received from subordinates”.<sup>1</sup> Although, apparently, measures to remedy the situation were taken, the envoy continued to receive reproaches on more specific issues in the same spirit as before. Thus, after Emir Faisal’s visit to the USSR in 1932, the Deputy Head of the 1<sup>st</sup> Eastern Desk of the NKID Osetrov, on September 5, 1932, complained to Pastukhov: “Thus, up to now (1) we have no clear answer from Comrade Tyuryakulov, whether Hijaz will agree to sign a separate political agreement (with or without a trade article); (2) The Hijaz government continues to expect to receive a long-term loan from us...”<sup>2</sup>. A little later, on November 16, Karakhan wrote to the plenipotentiary about the absence of reports concerning the impact of Faisal’s trip on the attitude of the Hijaz government towards the USSR.

Kuznetsky Most was particularly interested in the behavior of Fuad Hamza, since it remained unclear to the leadership of the People’s Commissariat whether the Hamza remained “loyal to Ibn Saud’s interests” or acted like an Anglophile, deliberately misinforming the King to create “an unfavorable impression of the real possibility that USSR would provide aid to Hijaz”. True, in Moscow it was known that the Saudi delegation raised the issue of a loan to London and was refused. “Only by receiving detailed information from you about what was happening in Hijaz at the time of the delegation’s stay in Moscow,” the Deputy Commissar then wrote to Tyuryakulov, “we can form a certain im-

<sup>1</sup> Karakhan to Tyuryakulov, May 21, 1929. Cit. from: Mansurov T. Plenipotentiary Nazir Tyuryakulov. Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya (“Young Guard”), 2005. P. 212.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. P. 322.

pression about the role of Fuad Hamza in these negotiations”<sup>1</sup>. It was clear that the PCFA was not pleased about the plenipotentiary’s failure to produce a detailed description of Hamza, although it was difficult to imagine that Soviet diplomats would be able to get such comprehensive information about the political positions of this important Saudi figure.

In early March of 1938, after several years of searching, American geologists discovered giant deposits of oil in the eastern part of the Kingdom. After this, such problems as the payment of “oil-kerosene” debts or the purchase of energy resources simply ceased to be a problem for Ibn Saud, who now found himself as the ruler of a country in possession of about a quarter of the world’s known reserves of “black gold.” The restoration of diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the successor nation of the USSR, the Russian Federation, had to wait several more decades for this to finally occur.

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The developments in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and around it, throughout a crucial period for the KSA from the late 1920-s until the early 1930-s, addressed herein, allow us to learn many a lesson useful for the diplomacy and politics, as their relevance reaches far beyond the geographical and chronological boundaries outlined above. **First**, their outcome was determined by the extent of adequacy and accuracy of the data revealing the state of affairs in the Kingdom. As it is perfectly clear now, one of the most influential external actors in Arabia at that time – the UK – due to its incompetence in collecting such reliable data and carrying out its objective analysis – failed to perform its mission, despite a wide range of opportunities that British diplomats could have availed themselves of. As can be seen from the documents and facts offered for research in this article, the evidence and source base made available for the Soviet diplomats was not fully sufficient either. However, ultimately, they managed, within a fairly short time, to build up in the KSA, despite the closeness of local community, a system of trustworthy contacts with some of the well-informed individuals representing its political, trade and administrative elite, likewise with certain members of the diplomatic corps. Owing to a restricted nature of such contacts and also the existing lack of trust in the relationships, both the British and some of the Soviet officials committed «tactical» blunders and errors in judgment.

**Second**, it is a matter of paramount importance to plan thoroughly and expediently, as well as target precisely the diplomatic activities amid the severe conditions when the scope of operation is strictly limited. Mistakes that are made along the way, including those of systematic occurrence, should be attributed to the impact of factors reflecting a low level of competence and lack of experience on behalf of the personnel in all echelons of power, even at the top level of strategic management, both in the host country, and also in the UK and the USSR. An example of strategically poor decision-making is London’s refusal to participate in the exploration of oil in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia likewise to extend fiscal support to the KSA leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. P. 324.



**Third**, the full-scale trade and economic ties lucrative for the Kingdom and its partners are vitally significant, primarily in such areas as energy and foodstuffs. In this respect, although there is a big difference in the KSA position and the state of its foreign partners then and now, explicit parallels can be drawn between the epochs so strikingly contrasting and apart.

**Fourth**, the human agency factor played a key part in the dynamic of foreign policy and foreign economic liaisons forged. The totally privileged and trust-based contacts maintained by Kerim Khakimov and Nazir Tyuryakulov with the senior members of the Kingdom's elite, including King Abdul Aziz bin Saud himself, were extremely instrumental in accomplishing the objectives set by the USSR leadership before its diplomatic representatives deployed in the KSA.

**Fifth**, the repercussions that the contest among various government divisions, agencies, and also personalities both within the USSR and the UK, had on the bilateral relations and, eventually, on their evolution, were sometimes deplorably detrimental to the state interests of each of the two most critical partners of the Kingdom, where, in turn, the strategic decision-making process did not always rely on the sound evaluation of all circumstances and factors involved.

Finally, **sixth**, our analysis has revealed the following: when ideology is gaining the upper hand over economy and politics, it is almost always fraught with negative consequences. The atheistic principles fostered by the Bolsheviks led to a situation when the Hajj pilgrimage by Soviet Muslims was practically reduced to nothing, while an attempt made by Emir Faisal, during a visit to the USSR of the Saudi delegation headed by him in 1932, to convince the Soviet leaders to change their policies with respect to the pilgrimage, ended in failure<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, a respectful attitude towards the Saudi state representatives displayed by the Soviet diplomats, who always treated the Saudis as equals, likewise the lack of colonial background on behalf of the Soviet Union have predetermined the good feelings among Arabs that still have a favorable bearing on their perception of Russia to this day.

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الشراكة المتعززة - الدبلوماسية السوفيتية في المملكة العربية السعودية بين الحربين العالميتين [al sharak al mutaafira – diplomacia alsufiatiya fi al mamlaka alarbiya al saudiya beina alharabina al alamitein] فيتال ناؤومكين [Vitaly Naumkin].

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, around 25,000 Russian Muslims travelled to the KSA for the Hajj pilgrimage in 2023.