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THE HISTORY OF SAUDI ARABIA

Saqi Books

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The present agencies of the government of Hijaz and of Najd and its dependencies shall preserve their current status temporarily until new agencies are established for the whole kingdom on the basis of the new amalgamation.

The council of ministers of Hijaz was charged to start drafting immediately the fundamental law (constitution) of the kingdom and the law on the organization of government,⁵⁶ but this was never done. The differences in administration between Najd and Hijaz persisted for many years and have not yet been eliminated.

The king's entourage

Although the administrative and bureaucratic machinery of Saudi Arabia had become more sophisticated, it was still the king and his close entourage who took the main decisions. Thus the people in attendance on the monarch were the most powerful in the state. According to Philby:

practically all the men he [Ibn Saud] collected round him . . . to deal with the activities of the various departments on his behalf, remained not only in his service, but roughly speaking in charge of the same departments, to the end of his life . . . It certainly illustrates an important trait in his own character: a sort of mild xenophobia, whose symptoms were a lack of enthusiasm for strange society, easily disguised of course by his lavish hospitality and genuine friendliness, and a curious preference for having round him at all times, day in and day out, year in and year out, the same people, always the same people, whether members of the family, or officials, or boon-companions, or servants. It was only in their company that he could relax . . . These people he could trust because he knew them intimately, their virtues and their faults; and these people he bound to himself and his service with a boundless generosity, ever increasing with the augmentation of his resources.⁵⁷

The head of the financial agency, Abdallah al-Sulaiman, only resigned after King Ibn Saud's death to be replaced by Muhammad Surur al-Sabban. Abdallah al-Sulaiman's personality and activities are worth describing in some detail. Born in Anaiza (Qasim) in 1887, he had visited India and lived in Bahrain and other Gulf countries before settling in Riyadh, where his brother served at Ibn Saud's *diwan*. When this brother fell ill, Abdallah replaced him. Ibn Saud liked him for his good handwriting, intelligence, active nature and resourcefulness. The emir of Riyadh made him responsible first for the silver coins fund and then for the gold coins spent on his court and guests.

Abdallah al-Sulaiman's functions gradually expanded and he was put in charge of managing the subsidy of £5,000 paid to Ibn Saud by the British government until 1924. Ibn Saud made al-Sulaiman the chief manager of the finances. Al-Sulaiman had friends among the merchants who loaned him money 'without interest', since interest was considered usurious profit by Islam. The loans were used to purchase goods for the court 'on instalments' at inflated prices.⁵⁸ Turakulov, the Soviet consul-general in

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Jidda, reported back in 1929, 'Abdallah al-Sulaiman plays the decisive role in the economic problems of Hijaz and government supplies.' He noted that al-Sulaiman concluded contracts through figureheads.⁵⁹

While Ibn Saud emptied the exchequer, it was Abdallah al-Sulaiman's duty to replenish it. When the Arabic equivalent of 'minister' - *wazir* - came to be used in Najd in the early 1930s, it implied Abdallah al-Sulaiman, since Faisal, the minister of foreign affairs, had a different title and was never referred to as His Excellency as al-Sulaiman was. The minister of finance had his own entourage and his own 'companions' - some 400 officials, slaves and guards, maintained at his expense. He owned palaces and land.⁶⁰

The king seldom received people in private, but al-Sulaiman had access to the king's bedroom after the general council meeting, when he put his requests to the monarch. All coded messages from the royal *diwan* were in triplicate: one for Crown Prince Saud, one for Prince Faisal and one for al-Sulaiman. The minister of finance had an influence over the armed forces, since it was he who allocated funds for salaries and financed arms purchases. His critics claimed that he had become the uncrowned king of Saudi Arabia. After retiring in 1954, he became the owner of a chain of hotels and trading companies.⁶¹

Among Ibn Saud's advisers was an Iraqi from Mosul called Abdallah al-Damluji, who had come to Ibn Saud in 1915 as a physician and medical expert. Thanks to a slight knowledge of French, he was made responsible for receiving foreign guests at the court in Riyadh. After the conquest of Hijaz, he was appointed the king's personal representative in Jidda. He then became deputy minister of foreign affairs, a post he held until 1930. He was succeeded by Fuad Hamza, a Palestinian refugee, who worked in the ministry of foreign affairs until his death. During the Second World War, Fuad Hamza represented Saudi Arabia in Vichy and then in Ankara and tried to arrange a correspondence between Hitler and Ibn Saud.

As mentioned previously, Ibn Saud's team included Hafiz Wahba and Yusuf Yasin. Wahba had previously been sent into exile on Malta by the British for his involvement with the 1919 revolt in Egypt. He became director of the education department, then Saudi envoy to the Vatican and finally ambassador to London.⁶² Yusuf Yasin, who was from Latakia (Syria), came to Arabia in 1924 and found favour with Ibn Saud. He was the king's political secretary before being made minister of state. He was responsible for the correspondence with Saudi representatives abroad.⁶³

In the initial period of his rule, Ibn Saud refrained from appointing his sons and relatives to high administrative posts, with the exception of his eldest sons Saud and Faisal, who became viceroys of Najd and Hijaz respectively. (Ibn Saud might have remembered the fate of his grandfather Faisal ibn Turki's state, destroyed by his sons' rivalry.) Over time, however, that practice changed and members of the royal family came to occupy key positions in the state machinery.