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# U.S.-Saudi bond forged despite Soviets

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The recent success of U.S. and Saudi intelligence services in thwarting an al-Qaida plot to bomb a U.S.-bound airliner illustrates the importance of America's nearly 70-year-old strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia. But that relationship might have never materialized had the visit of Saudi Prince Faysal to the Soviet Union on May 30, 1932, been a success.

When the Saudi prince arrived at Moscow's Belorussian-Baltic railway station, he was greeted by senior Soviet officials, two battalions of saluting soldiers, large crowds and bands playing the national anthem of his kingdom. Soviet leaders hoped to impress Faysal and forge an alliance with his father, King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud. In 1925, Ibn Saud conquered the Hijaz, a coastal territory in Arabia that includes Islam's two holiest cities,

Mecca and Medina, and is the site of Islam's annual pilgrimage, the Hajj. Moscow, which championed anti-colonialism, saw the king as a potential ally who could rally Muslims against British interests in the Islamic world.

Faysal and his party met with the Soviet elite, visited military bases and factories, and attended plays at the Bolshoi Theater. They then went to other areas of the Soviet Union, where the prince marveled at the country's many industries and modern technology. He cabled home that he "had been especially impressed by the oil derricks and the techniques of getting oil" in Baku, capital of the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan.

This comment and the Saudi government's desperate need for money

in 1932 concerned U.S. and British officials, who viewed the Soviets as a competitor in Arabia and the wider Middle East. Thousands of British Muslim subjects made the Hajj pilgrimage annually, and London worried that Moscow would spread anti-British propaganda among the pilgrims. For its part, Washington had just begun to realize the

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economic potential of Ibn Saud's kingdom.

These fears about the Soviet position in Saudi Arabia, however, were exaggerated. Although the Saudi government was effectively broke in

1932, it refused to accept Moscow's terms for a 1-million-pound loan and to a write-off of substantial Saudi debts to Moscow. Not only was Riyadh, a staunchly Muslim government, worried about being associated with a government that promoted atheism, but it was also in no position to alienate Britain. Saudi-Soviet diplomatic relations were eventually suspended in 1939, and Saudi ties with Moscow did not resume until after the Cold War ended.

The limited duration of Saudi-Soviet diplomatic ties, however, does not diminish the importance of the relationship, which has faded from the collective historical memory. The Soviet Union became the first government to recognize Ibn Saud's conquest of the Hijaz in 1925, and the Soviet delegation provided him crucial support for his claim to the territory at the Congress of Mecca in 1926. The Soviet Union also was an important trading partner for Saudi Arabia and supplied much of its oil in the early 1930s. But in 1933, just a year after Faysal marveled at the Soviet oilfields, a U.S. oil company won the right to explore for oil in Saudi Arabia.

The failure of the Soviet Union to build a viable relationship with Saudi Arabia would become an important missed opportunity for Moscow that would have a profound impact on the modern world. After 1945, the U.S.-Saudi relationship became the most important of its kind in the Middle East and was a linchpin of Washington's strategy to contain Soviet expansion and revive the global economy. Indeed, the Cold War might have turned out very different had a Soviet company won the contract to develop Saudi Arabia's oil in 1933.

Sean Foley is associate professor in the history department at Middle Tennessee State University.

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