

The Relationships between Saudi Arabia and the Idrisids Princes through Protectorate (Mecca) Agreement, 1926AD: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

In this paper, an attempt is made for identifying the type of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Idrisid princes in Asir Province through the 1926 Mecca Agreement. The historical roots of that relationship are sought to be shown. As shown in the paper, the essence of disputes on Asir is the conflict of international and regional strategic goals in the south of Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea. The Mecca Agreement was the result of a regional conflict of power and interests. Such conflict was won by the Saudis who were quite good at managing their state and building their domestic and international alliances.

Keywords: relationship, Mecca Agreement, Saudi Arabia, Asir

1. Introduction

A huge amount of modern and contemporary historical studies and military/ political literature were reserved for the attitude of entering into treaties/ agreements between King Abdul Aziz Al Saud (1880-1935) founder of the Modern Saudi State, on one hand, and Princes and Sheikhs of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, on the other hand. This was because of the great events concerned and the seriousness of their future consequences on relationships between states in the region.

This attitude seems to be deeply rooted in history and related to the power pattern as well as the development of societies in the region. It was also linked to the policies adopted by colonial countries for dominating the region; particularly Britain whose established policies were presented into treaties with Gulf princes and tribe leaders (sheikhs).

Perhaps the Mecca Protectorate agreement, signed on 21st October 1926 between the Saudi king and the Idrisid Prince in Asir, was significantly setting the guideline of their relationships and defined the final borders of the Saudi state. Such agreement made Asir an integral part of the Saudi land and the political system; and respectively excluding it from areas disputed with Yemen. Therefore, the treaty was a historical transformation in relationships between the two states, however it could not remove all tension in subsequent stages (Alkhatrash, 1983).

Hence, this study will highlight the nature of the said agreement, identify its conditions, and the results locally, regionally, and globally achieved – within the historical context, depending on historical resources and contemporary studies.

2. Geography and Strategic Importance of Asir

Asir Province is located southwest of Saudi Arabia on the Red Sea facing Bab El-Mandab, Qamran Islands, Forsan, and Dahlac. It is a strategic province having borders with various Arab and African countries. It is delineated by Hejaz from north, Yemen from south, Najd from east, and the Red Sea from west. Its area is estimated of (81000 m²) (Almalkawy, 1997; Handbook of Arabin, p. 1816; The Encyclopedia of Islam, p. 707).

Asir is composed of two parts. The first is Tehama, the coastal plain parallel to the Red Sea. It has several cities and ports such as: Qonfodha, Mahail, and Jazan. The second is Alssara, the mountains, heights, and deserts. It has many cities and urban conglomerates such as: Abha, Qahtan, Saada, Ghamed, Zahran, and Bisha (Ibn Mosfer, 1978).

Asir is vast and has a variety of contours. It is usually influenced by seasonal wind. It has plenty of water resources that enhanced agricultural activities and civilization. Its location; between the sea on the west, and the mountains and deserts on the east and south which helped protect it from foreign invasion and established stable semi-political entities for long periods there (Wahba, 1956).

The location of Asiron land and marine trade paths between the north and the south of Arabia, attracted regional and international power in the past and in modern times. After the Cape of Good Hope was discovered and the Suez Canal was dug, colonial European countries entered a fierce competition over borders of Arabia and the Red Sea. Control rotated among these countries, starting with Spain and Portugal, then France, Italy and England. These countries dominated Arabia's borders and the Arab Gulf since the early 1800s; redrew the political map of the region to satisfy their strategic. Thus, it can be inferred that the geographic location of Asir is the reason for its importance and due to foreign powers willing to extend their influence and enhance their interests. Yet, Asiris were fighting against foreign dominance and held on to their freedom and independence (Salem, 1977).

3. Precursors of the Concluding Agreement and Its Potentials

This title is meant to comprise all indicators, procedures, and political and military actions; which showed intentions or deliberation of the beginning of domestic and international powers in Asir; particularly Britain, Italy, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. World war one (1914-1918) may be considered as a starting point of these events. Warring parties such as Britain and the Ottoman Empire started making great efforts to enter agreements with domestic power in Arabia to help them in the war. Britain managed to attract most of these powers such as the Hashemite in Hejaz, who were entrusted by the British to lead the Arab liberation movement and declare the Great Arab Revolution (1916). Britain managed to recruit the Yemeni Imam and attracted the Idrisids leader Ali bin Mohammed in Asir (Antonios, 1987; Alrehani, 1981), and entered the Jazan Agreement with him on 30th April 1915. According to this agreement, the Idrisids leader declared war on the Ottoman Empire. In return Britain granted him protection against any foreign threat, supplied him with money and weapons, and put the Hudaida port under his control (Salem).

Britain was kept on allying with Abdul Aziz Al Saud, leader of Najd, since he took over Ehsaa in 1913. He expressed his desire to conclude a (truce) that was setting forth the remaining of a political British delegate, join the British arrangements of trade and piracy in the Gulf, pledge not to give up parts of his territory to another state, and accept British supervision on his foreign relations (Yasin, 1988). After the break of WWI, Ibn Saud chose preferably to ally with Britain against the Ottomans. His political dexterity forced British negotiators to approve giving him freedom to expand the borders of his state in Arabia and the Arab Gulf – according to the Treaty of Darin (26th December 1915). It was a very flexible treaty. Practically it was different from other British – Gulf treaties; as it did not delineate borders of Ibn Saud Properties. Thus, it marked an important turn in the traditional British policy in the region.

According to the Treaty of Darin, Britain acknowledged that Najd, Ehsaa, Qatif, Hubail, and their ports on the Gulf coast were properties of Ibn Saud and Heirs. Britain also pledged to support him against any foreign intervention/ attack, pay him a monthly subsidy, and provide him with weapons (Yasin). Treaty of Darin marked the beginning of the British-Saudi alliance and gave Ibn Saud full freedom to practice his expansionist policy and subordinate domestic powers; particularly the Hashemite in Hejaz and the Idrisids in Asir.

Upon the end of World War I, Ibn Saud headed to Asir to control it. His troops managed to control large parts of the territory, and was supported strongly by most tribes there. Unable to stand against this sweeping attack, Al Ayedh – Abha rulers- refuted to Hejaz and sought protection from Hussein bin Ali, Sharif Mecca, who gave them money and weapons to be able to take their territory back. Yet, they failed and sought shelter in Riyadh, putting themselves under Saudi protection (Alaqili, 1982). The Saudi arrival at Abha had its impacts. The Idrisids leaders asked Saudis to enter into an agreement for organizing their relationship. Ibn Saud agreed and an agreement was reached in 1920: The Fraternity and Friendship Agreement. According to this agreement, administration of Asir province and tribes was split between both parties. Ibn Saudi made a great success in contacting tribe leaders and winning their loyalty. This agreement was the first document of the subsequent 1926 Mecca Agreement (Alkhatrash).

On the other hand, the Yemeni Imam was not ready for Ibn Saud's arrival to the borders of his country. He tried to fight it, taking advantage of the weak Ali bin Mohammed Idris who ascended to power after his father's death

in 1923 and the tribe rebelled against him. The Imam put huge troops to Asir and controlled the cities and ports of Hudaida, Sabya, Jizan, Bajel, Al Luhayyah, and Midi). His troops controlled most parts of Tehama and prepared for a decisive military encounter with the Saudi, north of Asir (Almoqattam Magazine, 1952). Such events led to interference of major powers such as Italy and Britain in a crisis, as they were willing to maintain their interests and their allies' support. Britain felt the danger of Yemeni expansionism in north Asir, and Eden in south. So, Britain supported Ibn Saud politically and militarily to enable him stand in the face of the Imam supported financially and militarily by Italy (Alaqqad, 1970).

So, Asir was involved into international competition; lands were distributed between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The Idrisids felt their territory was surrounded from all directions. So, they attempted to enter into a protectorate agreement with the British. Yet, the British preferred to wait and declared that dispute over Asir is an internal Arab matter they have nothing to do with. Thus, the Idrisids' power deteriorated and he lost his power on tribes, which rebelled against him. So, he had to surrender the reign to his paternal uncle Alhassan Idris who, in turn, failed to get British and Saudi support against the Yemeni Imam (Alkhatrash & Salem). Ibn Saud preferred to give his entire attention to the issue of Hejaz and possessing it from the Hashemites. He managed to use Britain, which was at that time busy managing the situation in Sham and Iraq by virtue of the Historical Mandates agreements (Sykes-Picot, 1916) and (San Remo, 1920). Consequently, Britain attempted to stop the speedy Saudi troops heading for East Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait by forcing Ibn Saud to sign the Sarra and Bahra agreements in 1925, for the purpose of settling the dispute between the Saudis and Iraq & Jordan (Alomawi, 1990).

In December 1925, The Saudi troops advanced fast, controlled Hejaz, and entered Jeddah. Two days later, Ibn Saud announced the end of the Hejaz-Najd war; after Sharif Mecca gave up power to his son Ali, who was soon to be removed by Ibn Saud. Sharif Mecca sought shelter from his brother Faisal's Iraq. He remained there until he died in 1935. He was buried in the royal cemetery in Baghdad (Antonios, 1987, p. 456; Moris, pp. 94-95). In January 8th 1928, People of Hejazi declared their loyalty to Ibn Saud and installed him as the king of Hejaz and Sultan of Najd and its dependencies. In the next three months, he was acknowledged by major powers: Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. Thus, he became a foreseen leader. Some Arab chauvinists considered him a leader qualified to lead the Arab nation in its struggle for liberation and unity.

Ibn Saud was taking chances to intervene in Asir. He exploited the weakness of Idrisids who launched an initiative for entering an alliance with him against the Imam of Yemen. But Ibn Saud preferred not to hustle. When Idrisids urged him and sent mediators, Ibn Saud agreed and entered the Mecca agreement with them in 1926. Since then, mutual relationships were soon to enter a new stage (Alaqili & Ibn Mosfer).

3.1 Analyzing the Treaty Text

The treaty included ten articles, the first six articles treated borders, territories, internal management, foreign relations and defense affairs issues. The rest articles were only pro forma. To review what are these items and the consequences of this treaty, here is the full text:

Art. 1. His Lordship the Imam Sayyid al-Hassan ibn Ali al-Idrisi acknowledges the ancient marches described in the treaty on 10th of Safar, 1339, made between the Sultan of Najd and the Imam Sayyid Mohammad ibn Ali al-Idrisi, and which were at the date subject to the House of Idrisi, as being in virtue of this agreement under the suzerainty of His Majesty the King of Hejaz, Sultan of Najd and its dependencies.

Art. 2. The Imam of Asir may not enter into political negotiations with any Government or grant any economic concession to any person except with the sanction of His Majesty the King of Hejaz, Sultan of Najd and its dependencies.

Art. 3. The imam of Asir may not declare war or make peace except with the sanction of His Majesty the King of Hejaz, Sultan of Najd and its dependencies.

Art. 4. The Imam of Asir may not cede any part of the territories of Asir described in Article 1.

Art. 5. The King of Hejaz, Sultan of Najd and its dependencies, agrees that the internal administration of Asir, the supervision of its tribal affairs, appointments and dismissals; pertains to the right of the Imam of Asir, provided such administration is in compliance with Sharia law and justice according to the practice of both governments.

Art. 6. The King of Hejaz, Sultan of Najd and its dependencies, undertakes to repel all internal and external aggression which may befall the territories of Asir as defined in Article 1 and this agreement between the two contracting parties according to the circumstances and exigencies of interest.

Art. 7. Both parties agree to adhere to this agreement and to carry out its obligations.

Art. 8. This agreement will be effective upon confirmation by the two high contracting parties.

Art. 9. This agreement has been drawn up in Arabic and of two copies, one of which will be preserved by each of the two contracting parties.

Art. 10. This agreement was signed on 24 Rabie al-Thani AH, 21 October 1926 (Al-Oquili & Ibn Mosfer).

If we examine carefully the treaty's items, we would find that the first article emphasized the recognition of the Saudis control over northern and eastern regions of Asir, while Saudis admitted Idrisid entitlement to manage the northern parts of Asir and this is what is stated in fourth and fifth articles. Articles 2 & 5 focus on the limits that restrict al-Idrisi's freedom to have relations with external parties and it is likely that those parties intended to be Italy and Yemen. also Article Four deprived al-Idrisi from the right of disposition of the land he rules either by ceding or giving a foreign third party the right to have investments on it. Article three deprived al-Idrisi from the right to declare war or take peace decisions unless sanction of His Majesty the King of Saudi Arabia (Al-Zarkali, 1990; Bnoamichan, 1965). It is obvious that this treaty was intended to restrict al-Idrisi with heavy constraints and to consider him as a local governor of the Saudis. Soon after signing the treaty he felt the heaviness of these constraints, so he rose up calling for his and his family's freedom of ruling his country inciting people to revolt against Saudis but he did not succeed and had to run away to Yemen (Trbin, 1976; Gharaibeh, 1960).

What really attracts your attention concerning this treaty is that some Arabic and foreign historians and writers described it as protectorate; as it put Idrisid under Al-Saud protection according to treaty wording. If we looked carefully at its items we would notice that the word "Protection" was not mentioned in the treaty. In the meantime, writers pointed out that this treaty is classified as a protection treaty as had concluded between Britain and sheikhdoms of Arabian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, so they used protection wording for Saudis to rule the region of Asir. The English Cilve A. Lichard stated that the British Government recognition of this protection: "The Asir Become a Saudi Protectorate" (Cilve, 1984).

Discussing this matter needs thinking of the essence of the Public International Law to outline the meaning of "Protection" item, and recognizing if it is possible to apply it on this treaty. Protection item in International Law means "the protected State put itself or forced to put itself under tutelage of another stronger country in terms of an agreement concluded by the two sovereign states in the International Community, for defense and protection in exchange for participating in administrating its foreign affairs in terms of the treaty made between the two States..." (Geneva, 1938). As for tribal communities, the leader of the tribe is subject to the protection of a sovereign state that dominates the region where he lives and implements the de facto protection. To recognize forms of Sheikhdoms or emirates at that time and how close they were to modern State terms. State, in the International Law, has fixed standards and foundations as follows:

"State has full sovereignty and control over its internal and external affairs management with full independency of acting concerning its affairs as well as full administration without any observation (Gennea).

According to these two terminologies we can describe "Protection" as an incomplete concept in regard of the application of International Law in The Treaty of Mecca in 1926 for two reasons:

First, the Kingdom of Hejaz, Najd and its dependencies were under the protection of Britain, which dominates the region as stipulated explicitly in the items of the Treatment of Daren – Al-Aqueer in 1915 that Britain is protecting Sultanate of Najd and its dependencies from any external aggression "so, how can it protect another emirate while it is protected by Britain?" in addition to the lack of attributes of sovereignty of the Kingdom of Hijaz and Najd as its external and internal affairs management are subject to the oversight by another country - Britain – and does not enjoy independency in managing its affairs as well.

Second, the concept of State does not exist in tribal communities in the Arabian Peninsula, and authority is only tribal for a Sheikh or council over tribal people. Tribal communities have no formal governmental entities or institutions; as the Saudi State in the modern form was not known until the end of the local war led by Ibn Saud against his rivals. He called it the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as he established foundations of State Department with the help of experts from Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. The State, sovereignty, and authority concept was transferred to the tribal-sheikhdom system to change it into the modern political system with unified authority and institutions (Abu Alia, 1974).

3.2 Results and Implications of the Treaty

There were different reactions concerning the Treaty of Mecca. This was reflected in the States related to Asir issue situations such as Britain, Italy and Yemen as they made changes in the political reality of the region and

each country set forward its situation defending its interests. Concerning Britain, it was satisfied with the achievement of its Saudi ally, acknowledged the treaty, and supplied Saudi Arabia with military and political aids to enhance Saudi role. But for Italy, it tried to incite its ally the Imam of Yemen to refuse the recognition of the Treaty and to stand against the Saudis. But Italy did not have efficient capacity to keep Asir as a part of its territory and it wanted to get it back. Abdul Aziz Al Saud, the veteran politician did not give the Imam the opportunity of providing better offers in negotiations as he was caring for interest of both countries, but the Imam Yahya insisted on his position and supplied Hassan al-Idrisi with military support to revolt against Saudis. He was defeated by the Saudi forces; as a result the Imam had to recognize that Asir is a Saudi territory. This was done under the Treaty of Taif (30 May 1934) which was called (Treaty of Islamic friendship and Arab brotherhood). The two parties were cooperating to solve this problem, provide security, and to achieve peace between them.

The historian Stephen Lengrigg (He called the treaty of Mecca: Protection Treaty) indicated when speaking of the Treaty of Mecca that Ibn Saud went on his expansions in the Arabian Peninsula, which began early this century, and borders of his kingdom reached and included Asir; its area is 4/5 of the Arabian Peninsula. Boards of the Saudi Kingdom reached Kuwait, Iraq and East Jordan in the north, Yemen and Oman in the south, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE coast of Oman in the east and overlooks on 300 miles on the west coast of the Arabian Gulf, 100 miles on the west coast of the Arabian Gulf and a 100-square mile on the east coast of the Red Sea (Lingering, 1963).

The treaty resulted the change of the state by Ibn Saud from King of Hejaz, Sultan of Najd and its dependencies to the Kingdom of Hejaz, Najd and its dependencies on 19 January 1927 and he was called "King of Hejaz, Najd and its dependencies".

Finally, this is the end of Asir issue which was resolved in favor of the Saudis via treaties method, and the Treaty of Mecca 1926 was the basis for the rest of subsequent treaties.

4. Conclusion

This study tried to identify the circumstances of the Treaty of Mecca 1926 and have concluded a lot of outcomes; the most significant are:

- 1- The importance of Asir Province lies in its position on the road of international commercial transportation either onshore or offshore, and it connects the south of the Arab island, India and the Far East on the one hand and the Mediterranean world and the West on the other hand.
- 2- Asir issue was primarily a regional and international case as a result of its events reflection over the surrounding area which has a strategic significance for major European countries, specially Britain which monopolized control over the Arab Mashreq countries in general, and the Arabian Peninsula and the Arabian Gulf in particular.
- 3- Following the British tradition of making protection agreements enhanced with military force and religious ideas by Abdul Aziz Al Saud, it had a critical effect on strengthening its State's position and expansion of its borders.
- 4- The treaty of Mecca was not a protectorate one according to the sense intended by the International Law, but it has a particular similar style. It focused on the surrender of Idrisid to the Saudi authority in return of keeping their positions as temporary rulers of some parts of Asir.
- 5- The Treaty of Mecca influenced the future relationships with princes of Yemen who were based on sayings and words in their arguments concerning their rights in owning Asir territories.

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