

Airlift for Allah: The United States and the 1952 Hajj

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This presentation discusses the 1952 Hajj airlift, in which the U.S. Air Force flew approximately 4,000 Muslims from Beirut, Lebanon to Mecca, Saudi Arabia in just four days. Virtually unknown today, the “Airlift for Allah” marked a key shift in U.S. policy towards the Middle East and the quick thinking of American leaders to an emergency request for assistance from the governments of Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Ironically, just nine years earlier the State Department had rejected a plan for a similar Hajj airlift proposed by Archibald Roosevelt, the grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt and the cousin of President Franklin Roosevelt. U.S. officials told Archibald Roosevelt that air travel was inconsistent with Muslim ideals of suffering while on the Hajj and that Saudi Arabia was within Great Britain’s sphere of influence. They also worried that some Saudis would view a Hajj airlift as a threat to their national sovereignty and would use it as an excuse to limit U.S. access to Saudi Arabia’s oil reserves. The stark difference between the reactions of U.S. officials in 1943 and 1952 to assisting Muslim pilgrims provides an important window into the evolution of U.S. policies in the Middle East during the early Cold War. By using diplomatic and private correspondence, periodicals, and other primary sources, I will discuss how and why Washington undertook the airlift in 1952 and why it was subsequently forgotten. I will also argue that the Hajj airlift shows us that America’s historical ties with Saudi Arabia are more diverse than has been previously thought and include important aspects that are not tied to petroleum or to militant Islam. Forgotten or not, the “Airlift for Allah” was one of America’s few genuinely creative exchanges with the Middle East.