

Saudi Arabia: Britain's Hand in the Making of a "Terror State"

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King Salman of Saudi Arabia (left)

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has managed to nose itself into a unique global position. Despite the persistent reports of human rights abuses from within the kingdom, it continues to stand as an ally and 'friend' to both the UK and the US. Public beheadings in Chop Chop Square are [commonplace](#), which along with stoning, flogging and cross amputation (usually one hand and one foot on the opposite side), make up some of the state punishments for such appalling crimes as [witchcraft and sorcery](#).

But it is not only *within* the Kingdom that extreme human rights abuses are taking place. Since the Saudi-led air campaign over Yemen began in March 2015, there has been consistent [accusations of human rights abuses](#) from NGOs and other humanitarian groups on the ground. This was confirmed in January this year, when a leaked report from a UN panel of experts disclosed "[widespread and systematic](#)" attacks on Yemeni civilians, a *gross violation* of international law.

Yemen was an impoverished country before this devastating conflict, where "some 6,400 people have been killed in the past year, half of them civilians, and more than 30,000 are injured, with 2.5 million people displaced"[1] according to the UN.

Meanwhile, the [long history](#) of UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia have been going through the roof since 2010. David Cameron's government has [licensed almost £7billion](#) of arms to the Kingdom, with nearly £3bn coming *since* the Saudi bombing campaign over Yemen began. This completely flies in the face of [UK, EU and international law](#).

In a recent television [interview](#) for ITN news, Malcolm Rifkind, the former chair of the [Intelligence and Security Committee for Parliament](#), said:

"Over the years Saudi Arabia has been a strong ally of the United Kingdom, of the West. Apart from Yemen, Saudi Arabia has not had a reputation of using its military in other countries."[2]

The reason Rifkind can get away with such a plainly false statement is because the Saudi's internal reputation has for a long time overshadowed its (*overt*) external operations. However, the last 20 years have seen the regime increase its [military muscle](#) in the region. At present, Saudi Arabia is simultaneously bombarding Yemen in the south, whilst adding to the [high levels of military](#) build up around Syria, and taking part in huge military exercises in the north of the peninsula.

The kind of relationship which exists between the UK and Saudi Arabia was highlighted last September. The two nations [conspired prior](#) to a UN ballot, by secretly making arrangements to exchange votes and promote their positions within the UN Human Rights Council. Along with an obvious display of contempt towards the UN and democratic processes as a whole, this also carries with it a sick irony in that Saudi Arabia now [chairs](#) an influential UN panel to discuss human rights abuses, while simultaneously committing so many of its own.

So in light of all of this, why does the UK have such a cosy arrangement with an infamously brutal regime? Yes, the obvious lure of oil is a major factor, but if you really want to understand how this friendship developed, you'll need to know a little bit about its history.

The Origins of Wahhabism



In the 1740s, the geographical area now known as Saudi Arabia was more or less a plateau for warring Bedouin tribes. Ibn Saud, ancestor of the modern Saudi family, was just one of many desert leaders, raiding other tribes and vying for supremacy. But an [encounter](#) with exiled cleric Adl al-Wahhab (right), forged a partnership that would alter the fate of the whole Middle East.

Adl al-Wahhab was just another in a very long line of religious fanatics, but Ibn Saud saw something more in his extreme preaching. He realised al-Wahhab could lend him an edge over his tribal enemies and potentially offer him the opportunity to seize the peninsula.

Wahhab saw Islam's religious development from around 950-1000 AD as a [false path](#) that needed to be reversed and its doctrines abolished. His interpretation warned that anyone resisting his teachings, or who failed to follow them precisely, would be seen as 'non-Muslim'. This logic formed a simple choice for people: abide by Wahhabism or be slaughtered as a heretic.

The traditional raids of neighbouring tribal villages was, until the partnership of Wahhabism and the House of Saud, done for wealth and conquest. But now, with Wahhabism embedded into Saudi thought, the raids became *Islamic crusades*, leading to [thousands of violent executions](#) in neighbouring territory.

Word of the bloody raids soon spread and before long Ibn Saud and al-Wahhab's brutal reputation was striking fear into villages and cities throughout Arabia. They soon acquired

much of the peninsula. Reports of the massacres of thousands, such as at [Karbala in 1801](#), instilled yet more fear into surrounding settlements, including the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, both of which capitulated under the panic and fear created by Ibn Saud, with little or no resistance.

These were the *salad days* of Wahhabism. The glory days that are taught as such in Saudi primary schools today.

They didn't last long. The first quarter of the 19th century saw the Saud-Wahhab forces annihilated; first by the Egyptians, and then [again by the Turks](#). Their people, however, held out together in the desert, and importantly, so did their Wahhabi culture.

Britain Authenticates Extremism

For the next 100 years the Ottoman Empire hung over the peninsula, whilst the Sauds fought battle after battle with neighbouring tribes, once again vying for dominance. The years of persistent battle eventually caught up with them, when in 1891 they were finally defeated, with the Saud family [escaping to exile in Kuwait](#).

A decade or so later, Abd-al Aziz, the then Saud leader, returned from exile determined to reclaim the family's former power. In doing so he used much the same tactics as his ancestor, Ibn Saud, namely employing *fear* under the banner of *jihad*. But there were [two other](#) important aspects to Aziz's strategy that can't be overlooked: the *Ikhwan project*, and the support from the British.

A major part of Abd-al Aziz's strategy for reclaiming the peninsula was to extend Wahhabism through radical teaching into the surrounding Bedouin tribes. The traditional tribesmen were considered theological 'blank slates' by the House of Saud. Primitive and unenlightened, the *Jahiliyyah* were opened up to Wahhabi conversion by Saudi clerics with great enthusiasm.

The British Government began courting Abd-al Aziz when it became clear he would emerge as ruler of a vast portion of Arabia. The British rulers had much Empire to protect in the region, with the [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#) being discussed at the same time. Aziz knew he needed the British in order to authenticate the nation, and therefore to embed Wahhabism into the Kingdom.

In 1915, with the eyes of the world on the Dardanelles, France and Belgium, Ibn Saud signed the *Darin Treaty*, where he agreed to become part of the British Protectorate.

From Protection to Oil Addiction

One of the main problems with having a huge army of religious fanatics, is they can be hard to bring to heel.

It had been positively encouraged to raid any non-Wahhabi settlements prior to the Darin Treaty. But now with the British involvement, any attacks on other nations (especially those also under British protectorate) were outlawed. Even before the treaty was signed, a movement within the Ikwhan had formed, deeply unhappy with Abd-al Aziz due to his personal neglect of Wahhabi customs. They were angered by his sudden affiliation with foreign imperialists. The signing of the *Darin Treaty* and Abd-al Aziz's growing acceptance of Western modernity (cars, telephones and machine guns were being introduced) was felt to

be in direct conflict with the Wahhabi doctrine, which rejected non-traditional ways of life as incompatible with its teachings.

By the late 1920s, and after gaining both *Hejaz* and *Nedj*, Abd-al Aziz was finding the rift within the Ikwhan a concern that could no longer be ignored. The splinter movement had grown far beyond a splinter, and had intensified their *jihadi* attacks on Transjordan, Iraq and Kuwait. The self proclaimed *King of Hejaz and Nedj* knew that something had to be done.

The [Battle of Sabilla](#) in 1930 allowed Abd-al Aziz to seize his opportunity. The Ikwhan rejected modern weapons, and were [helplessly decimated by the machine gun fire](#) (supplied by the British) of Abd-al Aziz' loyalist army.

What remained of the Ikwhan was reabsorbed into the army, soon to become The Royal Saudi Landforce. In 1932 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was born, and just six years later prospectors struck major reserves of oil within the kingdom.

The Rise of the Islamic State



The contemporary incarnation of the Ikwhan needs no introduction. IS (or ISIS) are extremists whose clever use of social media, cold-blooded brutality and military proficiency has catapulted them into the centre of global affairs.

The conditions created by the West's *war-sanctions-war* policy in Iraq since 1991, left the country utterly broken, and a fertile breeding ground for extremism. John Pilger recently wrote, "like Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, ISIS are the mutations of a western state terror dispensed by a venal imperial elite undeterred by the consequences of actions taken at great remove in distance and culture." [3] I'd like to add another aspect to distance and culture: time.

The British were well aware of the Wahhabi culture within Saudi Arabia throughout their early relationship. Indeed, one of their officials [even converted](#). Yet, seemingly, at no time did it ever occur to anyone to be concerned about supporting the oppressive and violent culture of Wahhabism. Even a rudimentary sociological examination would have shown the self-destructive seed lying at the heart of the new Saudi society. But instead it has been allowed to grow unchecked by international concern, in favour of protecting part of an empire which has since become the private property of [Western oil corporations](#).

Unintelligent Intelligence

In an interview last year, David Cameron was pressed into giving his opinion on why the UK is so willing to maintain a friendly relationship with one of the worst regimes on the planet:

<http://www.channel4.com/news/david-cameron-challenged-over-saudi-arabian-teenager>

The Saudi Intelligence argument, used here by Cameron to hard-brake an interview he was rapidly losing control of, is echoed time and again by other politicians intent on keeping the relationship unchanged. Later, in the same [ITN report](#) as quoted earlier, Rifkin uses it too:

“The intelligence relationship is crucial, and that’s not just a general statement. I can make one hard example which is in the public domain. There are a lot of other examples I couldn’t give. But the hard one is the intelligence the Saudis gave to the United Kingdom, which led to a terrorist attempt to blow up a transatlantic air liner going to the United States. That failed.”[4]

But the reality is not so straightforward. It isn’t the pleasant back and forth of information you might be led to think. Unlike Rifkin’s claim, the intelligence was actually given to the US/CIA, not to the United Kingdom. Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz “personally made the call to the [then] White House counter-terrorism chief, John Brennan, to warn him about the Yemeni bombs.”[5]

A leading Saudi political opponent also told me that UK intelligence is permanently barraged with information, but the vast majority of it is aimed at opponents of the regime living in Britain, in an attempt to undermine and hurt their credibility, making it difficult to filter for genuine threats. Other Middle Eastern commentators have described the “Saudi intelligence structure [as] sloppy, unsophisticated, and badly trained.”[6]

If we add all this to the Serious Fraud Office being forced to drop the case of major corruption and slush funds surrounding BAE and Saudi arms deals, we begin to see the *fickle* nature of our intelligence sharing relationship. The SFO were told to retract because “the Saudis threatened to stop sharing intelligence with the UK.”[7]

Conclusion

History has seen a covert British hand forever present in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is a hand that rarely restricts, but often encourages Saudi ambition. But the British presence has become more apparent in recent years, as tensions in the Middle East have intensified after US military involvement from the 1990s onwards.

Despite corrupt arms deals, allegations of sponsoring [terrorism](#), the murderous war in Yemen where internationally outlawed [cluster munitions are being used](#), and their own *incredibly* bad human rights record, Saudi Arabia now sees itself as [unaccountable](#) to international law; much like the UK and the US, allies it once followed but now stands shoulder to shoulder with.

Is it finally time for the British public to reconsider the real *value* of such a relationship? And, to weigh that value against the bloody violence that inevitably comes with it?

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Notes:

[1] “‘Terrible Year’ in war-torn Yemen leaves majority of country’s people in need of aid – UN,” *UN News Centre*, 22 March, 2016, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=53519#.VwqxsD9fut8>

- [2] "Yemen's Forgotten War," *ITN News*, 30 March, 2016, <http://www.itv.com/news/update/2016-03-30/why-yemens-civil-war-puts-uk-in-tricky-position/>
- [3] "From Pol Pot to ISIS: "Anything that flies on everything that moves"," johnpilger.com, 8 October, 2014, <http://johnpilger.com/articles/from-pol-pot-to-isis-anything-that-flies-on-everything-that-moves>
- [4] "Yemen's Forgotten War."
- [5] "Cargo plane bomb plot: Saudi double agent 'gave crucial alert'," *The Guardian*, 1 November, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/01/cargo-plane-plot-saudi-agent-gave-alert>
- [6] Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, "The Ridiculous Nature of Saudi Intelligence: What the Saudi Cables Released by WikiLeaks Say and Don't Say," *Global Research*, 32 June 2015, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/what-the-saudi-cables-released-by-wikleaks-say-and-dont-say/5457713>
- [7] Richard Norton-Taylor, "The Saudi tip-off and the cargo bomb plot," *The Guardian*, 1 November, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/nov/01/saudi-tip-off-bomb-plot>

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