

The British Establishment Is Putting Our Lives at Risk: Our State's Key Ally Is a Major Public Threat

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The country is in shock after the worst terrorist attack in 12 years. The deranged extremist who detonated the bomb bears sole responsibility for the outrage and is not a soldier – for Islam or whoever – but a murderer. The Manchester suicide bombing is an act of barbarism inflicted on entirely innocent people.

This wave of terrorism driven by Islamic State, which has claimed responsibility for the attack, derives from a complex infrastructure of forces, working over time. But it springs ultimately from the ideology promoted by the ruling family in Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism, who were at least until recently funding and backing IS: they have done so to support their goal of overthrowing Assad in Syria and championing Sunni Islam in the face of rivalry with Iran. These are Britain's allies. Whitehall has a deep, long-standing special relationship with the extremist Saudis: it is arming them, backing them, apologising for them, and supporting their regional policies. At the same time, the Saudis have been helping to create the monster that now threatens the British public. So, too, have the policies of the British government.

This is terrible, in the true sense of the term: the British establishment is putting our lives at risk in its obsessive obsequiousness in backing the Saudi state. We have to recognise that we are caught between two extremisms – that of IS and that of our own state's priorities.

The British elite is perfectly aware of the insidious role that Saudi Arabia plays in fomenting terrorism. In October 2014, General Jonathan Shaw, a former Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff, told the Telegraph that Saudi Arabia and Qatar were primarily responsible for the rise of the extremist Islam that inspires IS terrorists. He said:

"This is a time bomb that, under the guise of education, Wahhabi Salafism is igniting under the world really. And it is funded by Saudi and Qatari money and that must stop."

He noted that UK/US bombing of IS would not "stop the support of people in Qatar and Saudi Arabia for this kind of activity" because:

"It's not addressing the fundamental problem of Wahhabi Salafism as a culture and a creed, which has got out of control and is still the ideological basis of Isil – and which will continue to exist even if we stop their advance in Iraq."

Shaw added:

“My systemic worry is that we’re repeating the mistakes that we made in Afghanistan and Iraq: putting the military far too up front and centre in our response to the threat without addressing the fundamental political question and the causes. The danger is that yet again we’re taking a symptomatic treatment not a causal one.”[1]

Last December Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, in off-the-cuff remarks, accused Saudi Arabia of ‘puppeteering and playing proxy wars’ in the Middle East by ‘abusing religion and different strains of the same religion in order to further their own political objectives’.[2] Johnson was correct and it was a rare public admission of British awareness of the Saudi role, in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere, which, as he and other officials must know full well, has had terrible consequences.

Saudi support for extremism

The Saudi role in exporting Wahhabism is surely well-known by now. In the past few decades, the Saudi regime has spent billions spreading its extremist interpretation of Islam worldwide, funding mosques and free madrassas – religious schools – supplying them with imams and textbooks. In 2013, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in a private speech (leaked in 2016) that

“the Saudis have exported more extreme ideology than any other place on earth over the course of the last 30 years.”[3]

This Saudi funding has included support for terrorism. EU intelligence experts estimate that 15 to 20 per cent of Saudi funding for its Wahhabist causes has been diverted to al-Qaeda and other violent jihadists.[4] A June 2013 report by the European Parliament deemed Wahhabism the main source of global terrorism. A classified 2009 cable signed by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (also released by WikiLeaks) acknowledged:

“Donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide.”[5]



IS executed the followers of the Egyptian Church (Source: Imgur)

A State Department cable of 2009 released under Clinton’s name in December 2009 states that

“Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaeda, the Taliban, LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan].”[6]

The Saudis have been funding terrorism for decades while Whitehall (and Washington) has been supporting them. In May 1974, for example, the US State Department warned Britain not to go ahead with its reported offer to sell Blowpipe surface-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia, for fear of “seepage of this type of weapon into the hands of terrorists”.[7] The US

ambassador to Saudi Arabia told his British equivalent that the US had refused to sell similar equipment, the Redeye, for fear of their ending up in the hands of terrorists and being “used against civil aircraft or similar targets”. [8]

Islamic State

IS, which is believed to have been formed in 2006, has grown out of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and the terrorist infrastructure built up with Saudi money and Western covert action seeking to oust Assad of Syria. IS is certainly not a creation of the UK, US and its allies, but the latter's policies have contributed to its growth.

Donors in the Gulf, including Saudis, have funnelled hundreds of millions of dollars to rebel groups in Syria in recent years, including to IS. [9] A secret memo written by Hillary Clinton in August 2014 (which appeared on the WikiLeaks website in 2016) noted that the Saudi and Qatari governments “are providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL [IS] and other radical Sunni groups in the region”. [10] Following IS's capture of Mosul in northern Iraq in June 2014, former Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal told US secretary of state John Kerry that

“Daesh is our [Sunni] response to your support for the Da'wa,” the Shia Islamist party the US installed in power in Iraq. [11]

Saudi Arabia's neighbour Qatar, the world's only other predominantly Wahhabi state with whom Theresa May's government has recently signed large commercial deals, may have been the biggest funder of the Syrian rebels, with some estimates suggesting the amount may be as much as \$3bn. [12] In 2012, the New York Times reported, based on military sources, that

“most of the arms shipped at the behest of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to supply Syrian rebel groups... are going to hard-line Islamic jihadists, and not the more secular opposition groups that the West wants to bolster”. [13]

This was of course all well-known to officials in London and Washington as they pretended to their publics to be supporting only ‘moderate’ rebel groups. In October 2014, Obama's Vice President Joe Biden harshly criticised Saudi Arabia and Turkey in a talk at Harvard University. He noted that “they were so determined to take down” Assad that they:

“poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad – except that the people who were being supplied were al-Nusra, and al-Qaida, and the extremist elements of jihadis who were coming from other parts of the world.”

He added,

“We could not convince our colleagues to stop supplying them.” [14]



As Nafeez Ahmed has argued, Western governments have deliberately allied with al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremist groups to topple Assad. A 2012 Defence Intelligence Agency document notes that

“the Salafist [sic], the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [al-Qaeda in Iraq] are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria,” and that “the West, Gulf countries, and Turkey support the opposition”.

The document stated that

al-Qaeda in Iraq, the precursor to IS, “supported the Syrian opposition from the beginning, both ideologically and through the media.”

But the document also forecast the probable declaration of “an Islamic State through its union with other terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria.” Nevertheless, “Western countries, the Gulf states and Turkey are supporting these efforts” by Syrian “opposition forces”. Further the document noted that:

“there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist Principality in eastern Syria (Hasaka and Der Zor), and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).”

As Ahmed comments, the document provides extraordinary confirmation that the US-led coalition currently fighting IS had previously welcomed the emergence of an extremist “Salafist Principality” in the region as a way to undermine Assad, and block off the strategic expansion of Iran.[15]

US journalist Rania Khalek has written[16] that it was not until 2014, when IS started beheading westerners on video, that the group became a major concern for the West. Prior to that, Western covert operations in Syria were so focused on weakening Assad, they acquiesced as Saudi Arabia and Qatar funded and armed IS, following which IS brutally swept across swathes of Syria and Iraq.[17] The US then put heavy pressure on Saudi Arabia and Qatar to stop their support to IS and other radical groups in Syria, which is believed to have happened. However, Saudi Arabia still supports anti-Assad groups in Syria, which has been reported as including the Islamist Jaysh al-Islam.[18] Now, the Saudi regime is

pledging support, including military operations, for the fight against IS in Syria. But the point is: the genie has long been out of the bottle.[19]

Britain's covert role in Syria has served to prolong the war and, in alliance with the US and Saudi Arabia, de facto helped strengthen the hard-line groups who are now our enemies. There is some evidence that Britain had planned covert action in Syria to oust Assad as early as 2009, even before the uprising began in 2011.[20] But Britain is reported to have begun training Syrian rebel forces from bases in Jordan in 2012.[21] Although focused on 'moderate' rebels, the ever-changing nature of the opposition forces and inter-operability between them has blurred any useful distinctions between 'moderate' and 'hardline'. In 2015, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon told parliament that

"the vast majority of [Syrian] opposition groups are Islamist".[22]

Foreign Office Minister Baroness Anelay said in 2017 that the situation among the opposition groups in Syria "can indeed be fluid" and that "there can be splintering of those groups and some which appeared in the past to be moderate then change their view and join up with those with whom this country will have no truck".[23] There is some evidence that some Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebels receiving elite training from British and French forces went straight into IS, with one IS commander quoted as saying:

"Many of the FSA people who the west has trained are actually joining us."[24]

Support for Saudi Arabia

All the while the Saudis have been exporting Wahhabism and backing Islamist groups and terrorists, they have enjoyed a special relationship with London and Washington. The history is so long and deep it is hard to summarise: basically the relationship is characterised by extreme sycophancy, total military support, constant apologies and carefully-controlled media lines that serve to keep the public in the dark about the true extent of relations and the nature of the Saudi regime. It is hard to pinpoint whether Saudi Arabia is a client of the UK or the other way round: probably both, since both set of elites have been happily joined at the hip.



Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Prince Turki al-Faisal and Prince Al-Waleed (Source: PressTV)

The terrible bombing of Yemen by Saudi aircraft supplied by Britain, armed by Britain and conducted by British-trained pilots is but the latest episode in extreme UK support for Saudi foreign policy. The blood covers the hands of the entire British establishment. As Yasmin Alibhai-Brown has pointed out, the Royal Family, successive governments, parliamentarians, a good number of institutions and people with clout collectively suck up to the Saudi ruling clan.[25]

The result of all this is catastrophic. The 'war on terror' is a joke when your leading ally is the world's biggest sponsor of terrorism. Independent journalist Patrick Cockburn has written that in the 20 years between 1996 and 2016, the CIA and British security and foreign policy agencies have consistently given priority to maintaining their partnership with

powerful Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies, Turkey and Pakistan over the elimination of terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda, al-Nusra, Isis and the Taliban.[26]

That is completely correct, and this is not just turning a blind eye. As I try to show in my book, *Secret Affairs*[27], the backing of Saudi Arabia is part of a broader story: that British governments, both Labour and Conservative, have, in pursuing the so-called 'national interest' abroad, colluded for decades not only with the arch-sponsor of radical Islamism in Riyadh but sometimes with radical groups themselves, including terrorist organisations. They have connived with them, and often trained and financed them, in order to promote specific foreign policy objectives. Governments have done so in often desperate attempts to maintain Britain's global power in the face of increasing weakness in key regions of the world, being unable to unilaterally impose their will and lacking other local allies. Thus the story is intimately related to that of Britain's imperial decline and the attempt to maintain influence in the world.

Theresa May's government, as previous governments, have endangered the British public by the relationship they choose to have with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. In recent months, May has signed up Britain to a new generation of special relationships with these states, based on selling more arms and providing more training of their militaries and security forces to keep the ruling families in power. All this has been done on the quiet, with scant government or media reporting. We are set for another generation of domestic tyranny in Gulf and foreign Islamist adventures, all now helped by raising the enemy of 'Iran' – a foreign policy agenda being set by Riyadh and recently helped by President Trump's preposterous invocation of Iran as the major sponsor of terrorism in the Middle East.

We are in serious trouble unless this all changes. Our leaders' policies are endangering us, and are among our major threats. The terrorism that we, ordinary people, face, derives from an ideology and infrastructure to which our leaders, claiming to protect us, have contributed. We desperately need another foreign policy entirely, one based on support for those promoting democracy and human rights – rather on than those with contempt for them.

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