

The Need to Hold Saudi Arabia Accountable

Exclusive: One of Official Washington's favorite "group thinks" is to insist that Iran is the "chief sponsor of terrorism," but the reality is that Saudi Arabia is much guiltier and U.S. officials know it, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If someone wants to become somebody in Official Washington, there are certain lies that you must assert as undeniable truths, almost like flashing a secret sign to gain entry to an exclusive club. For instance, you must say that Iran is the world's "chief sponsor of terrorism" though that is patently false.

The problem is that a much bigger sponsor of terrorism is Saudi Arabia, with some competition from Qatar, but those two Gulf states are extremely wealthy U.S. "allies" and their hatred of Iran is shared by Israel, which possesses the most intimidating foreign lobby in Washington. So, deviation from the "Iran-chief-sponsor-of-terrorism" mantra marks you as someone who is not part of the club and never will be.

Yet, while lies may be the mother's milk of Official Washington, there are severe costs paid by the American people and even more by the people of the Middle East who have suffered from the bloody consequences of this particular lie because it has been at the root of a series of misguided U.S. interventions, which themselves have spread widespread terror.

The U.S. government allied itself with Saudi Arabia in building the modern Islamic terrorism movement in the 1980s when the Reagan administration went in 50/50 with Saudi Arabia to finance and arm the Afghan mujahedeen – a project costing billions of dollars – to fight a merciless war against Soviet troops defending a leftist, secular regime in Kabul.

That war not only opened the gates of Kabul to the likes of Saudi jihadist Osama bin Laden and the Taliban but it created the methodology and means for the Saudis to expand their Sunni proxy wars against various Shiite "apostates" and secularists across the region.

Though hailed in U.S. propaganda as noble freedom fighters, the mujahedeen routinely sodomized, tortured and murdered captured Russian soldiers and put Afghan women back into prehistoric servitude. After the Taliban prevailed in 1996, they castrated Afghan President Najibullah and hung his mutilated body from a light pole. In the years that followed, there were plenty of public

beheadings for violating the Taliban's fundamentalist teachings, which were shared by Saudi officialdom.

From the "successful" Afghan experience, the Saudi intelligence agency recognized the value of using Sunni fundamentalist fanatics as the tip of the spear in wars against Middle East secularists and Shiites, including Shia Islam's spinoffs, such as Alawites and Houthis.

The Saudis also recognized the value of influencing Official Washington, which the kingdom had tried to do by creating its own lobby based on spreading around lots of money. But that Saudi effort was blunted by Israel and its lobby, which didn't want to share its unmatched influence over the U.S. government.

So, the Saudis found it easier to "rent" the Israel Lobby by developing covert ties with Israel and quietly paying Israel billions of dollars. The Saudi dollars, in effect, replaced the money that Israel had been getting from Iran during the 1980s when Israel brokered Iran's arms sales. As part of the Israeli-Saudi under-the-table alliance, the two countries agreed that Iran and the so-called "Shiite crescent" – stretching from Tehran through Damascus to Hezbollah neighborhoods of Beirut – were their joint strategic enemies.

Behind the combined clout of politically influential Israel and financially powerful Saudi Arabia, the script was written for U.S. politicians, pundits and officials to recite: "Iran is the chief sponsor of terrorism."

This dogma is repeated again and again, including by retired Generals James Mattis and Michael Flynn, President-elect Donald Trump's choices for Defense Secretary and National Security Advisor, respectively. But the terror groups that Americans fear most, such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State, are supported by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, not by Iran.

Hillary Knew Well

And this reality is well known to senior U.S. officials even though it is never openly acknowledged. For instance, classified documents provided to WikiLeaks included diplomatic cables from then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and top advisers recognizing that violent jihadist groups were raising millions of dollars from Saudi Arabia, an inconvenient truth that even The New York Times has finally recognized.

Secretary Clinton wrote in a December 2009 cable that Saudi Arabia was the "most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide." Clinton recognized that Saudi largesse also was financing terrorists of Islamic State (aka ISIS or ISIL) inside Syria and Iraq.

In a 2014 email from the leaked account of Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta, Clinton wrote, "we need to use our diplomatic and more traditional intelligence assets to bring pressure on the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which are providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups in the region."

A Confession

To better understand the Saudi role in supporting Sunni extremism, you have to recognize that the Saudi princelings get a pass on their licentious behavior by buying leniency from the religious ulema (or leaders) through financing the extreme Wahhabi teachings that justify bloody retribution on all sorts of heretics.

This reality was explained in testimony by Zacarias Moussaoui, the so-called twentieth 9/11 hijacker who is serving a life sentence in a federal supermax prison in Florence, Colorado. Moussaoui told lawyers for the families of 9/11 victims about top-level Saudi support for Osama bin Laden right up to the eve of the attacks and even described a plot by a Saudi embassy employee to sneak a Stinger missile into the U.S. under diplomatic cover and use it to bring down Air Force One.

Moussaoui's list of Al Qaeda contributors included the late King Abdulllah and his hard-line successor, Salman bin Abdulaziz; Turki Al Faisal, the former head of Saudi intelligence and subsequently ambassador to the U.S. and U.K.; Bandar bin Sultan, a former ambassador, intelligence chief and close friend of the Bush family; and Al-Waleed bin Talal, a major investor in Citigroup, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, the Hotel George V in Paris, and the Plaza in New York.

"Ulema, essentially they are the king maker," Moussaoui testified. "If the ulema say that you should not take power [because of some personal deviancy], you are not going to take power."

Israeli Preference

Israeli officials also have explained why they favor Al Qaeda or Islamic State over the secular Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad – because Assad is supported by Iran and comes from the Alawite branch of Shiite Islam.

In one of the most explicit expressions of Israel's views, its Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, a close adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told the Jerusalem Post in September 2013 that Israel favored the Sunni extremists over Assad.

"The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran,

to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc,” Oren told the Jerusalem Post in an interview. “We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren’t backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran.” He said this was the case even if the “bad guys” were affiliated with Al Qaeda.

And, if you might have thought that Oren had misspoken, he reiterated his position in June 2014 at an Aspen Institute conference. Then, speaking as a former ambassador, Oren said Israel would even prefer a victory by Islamic State, which was massacring captured Iraqi soldiers and beheading Westerners, than the continuation of the Iranian-backed Assad in Syria.

“From Israel’s perspective, if there’s got to be an evil that’s got to prevail, let the Sunni evil prevail,” said Oren, who is now a deputy minister for diplomacy in Netanyahu’s office.

Israel’s preference for the “Sunni evil” – along with its semi-covert relationship with Saudi Arabia – helps explain why the Israel Lobby has weighed in so heavily against Iran and the Shiites.

Iran’s Guilt

But what’s the truth about Iran? While Saudi Arabia and Qatar finance Islamic State, Al Qaeda and the Taliban, there must be reasons why U.S. officials line up to profess that Iran is the “chief sponsor of terrorism.”

Well, apparently that is a reference to Iran’s support for Hezbollah, a Shiite movement in southern Lebanon that emerged as a resistance to Israeli occupation of that area in the 1980s. For years, Hezbollah has attacked Israeli targets in a tit-for-tat shadow war of assassinations and bombings that has crossed the line into terrorism by both sides. But neither Hezbollah nor Iran have been connected to any significant terror attack aimed at Americans in the past couple of decades.

Indeed, the usual citation regarding Iranian “terrorism” is the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks near Beirut airport in 1983, but that attack was not “terrorism,” at least as it is classically defined as an intentional attack on civilians with the intent of achieving a political objective.

The factual details here are important. President Ronald Reagan deployed the Marines as “peacekeepers” following Israel’s invasion and occupation of much of Lebanon. However, as fighting continued, there was mission creep.

National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, who often represented Israel’s interests in the upper echelons of the Reagan administration, convinced the

President to authorize the USS New Jersey to fire long-distance shells into Muslim villages, killing civilians and convincing Shiite militants that the United States had joined the conflict.

On Oct. 23, 1983, Shiite militants struck back, sending a suicide truck bomber through U.S. security positions, demolishing the high-rise Marine barracks in Beirut and killing 241 American servicemen.

Though the U.S. news media immediately labeled the Marine barracks bombing an act of "terrorism" – and that misnomer has stuck – Reagan administration insiders knew better, recognizing that McFarlane's "mission creep" had made the U.S. troops vulnerable to retaliation.

"When the shells started falling on the Shiites, they assumed the American 'referee' had taken sides," Gen. Colin Powell wrote in his memoir, *My American Journey*. In other words, Powell, who was then military adviser to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, recognized that the actions of the U.S. military had altered the status of the Marines in the eyes of the Shiites.

But that is not to say that in the 1980s and the early 1990s Iran did not support actions that would constitute "terrorism." There were the kidnappings of American civilians in Lebanon (and possibly the retaliatory bombing of PanAm 103 in 1988 after the U.S. Navy had shot down an Iranian civilian airliner a few months earlier). But the main reason that Iran is still touted as the "chief sponsor of terrorism" is that it remains at the top of Israel's and Saudi Arabia's enemies list, not that the label is justified by recent events and evidence.

The claim by some Americans that Iran's support for Iraqi resistance to the American military occupation of Iraq was "terrorism" also turns the concept on "terrorism" on its head since American soldiers who have conquered a sovereign nation are not "civilians" and thus attacking them with IEDs or other weapons does not constitute "terrorism."

The more recent complaints about Iranian "aggression" are even more dishonest. Iran has been invited by the sovereign governments of Iraq and Syria to assist in fighting Islamic State and Al Qaeda terrorists in those countries. Under international law, there is nothing illegal about that and it surely does not constitute "aggression."

Saudi Arabia and the State Department have also accused Iran of supporting Houthi rebels in Yemen, although the extent of that assistance is apparently negligible and whatever it is, it is vastly overwhelmed by Saudi Arabia's massive bombardment of Yemen, a true act of aggression that has killed hundreds

if not thousands of civilians and is supported by the Obama administration.

Politicians Held Hostage

So, when I hear major U.S. officials repeat the falsehood about Iran as the “chief sponsor of terrorism” again and again, I’m reminded of a hostage video in which a captive is forced to read lies written by his captors who would inflict pain or death if the captive deviated from the script. But it’s hard to tell if these U.S. officials know that they’re lying or have internalized the lie as “truth.”

If some U.S. official did publicly pronounce the truth – that Saudi Arabia far outranks Iran as the “chief sponsor of terrorism” and that many people in the world would put the United States even higher – the truth-teller might never survive another Senate confirmation hearing, since the Israel Lobby would call in its chits and make an example of the apostate.

Which gets us to the problem of President-elect Trump naming retired Generals Mattis and Flynn to top national security posts. Was their Iran-bashing heartfelt, i.e., do they really believe this propaganda is true, or were they simply protecting their Official Washington “credibility” by saying something they knew to be false but also knew was a required password to enter the domain of the political elite?

The question is not an idle one because if President Trump is to achieve anything meaningful in the Middle East, he must begin by leveling with the American people about what the U.S. government really knows and then acting on the reality that Saudi Arabia – with its sponsorship of Al Qaeda, Islamic State and the Taliban – can no longer be coddled.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
