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How Saudi Wahhabism Is the Fountainhead of Islamist Terrorism



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LONDON — The horrific terrorist attacks on the *Charlie Hebdo* weekly in Paris have led to speculation as to whether the killers — the brothers [Chérif and Saïd Kouachi](#) — were lone wolves or tied to masterminds in ISIS or its rival, Al-Qaeda. Although Al-Qaeda in Yemen has taken credit for the attack, [it is unclear how closely](#) the affiliate actually directed the operation. No matter which organizational connections (if any) ultimately prove to be real, one thing is clear: the [fountainhead of Islamic extremism](#) that promotes and legitimizes such violence lies with the fanatical “Wahhabi”

strain of Islam centered in Saudi Arabia. And if the world wants to tamp down and eliminate such violent extremism, it must confront this primary host and facilitator.

Perversely, while the Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Ali Awad Asiri took part in a “Je suis Charlie” solidarity rally in Beirut following the Paris attacks, back home the Saudi blogger Raif Badawi received the first 50 of 1,000 lashes he is due each Friday over the next 20 weeks. His crime? Running a liberal website promoting the freedom of speech. (Thankfully, in recent days it seems the Saudi authorities have buckled to international pressure and suspended the sentence.)

It would be troublesome but perhaps acceptable for the House of Saud to promote the intolerant and extremist Wahhabi creed just domestically. But, unfortunately, for decades the Saudis have also lavishly financed its propagation abroad. Exact numbers are not known, but it is thought that more than \$100 billion have been spent on exporting fanatical Wahhabism to various much poorer Muslim nations worldwide over the past three decades. It might well be twice that number. By comparison, the Soviets spent about \$7 billion spreading communism worldwide in the 70 years from 1921 and 1991.

This appears to be a monumental campaign to bulldoze the more moderate strains of Islam, and replace them with the theo-fascist Saudi variety. Despite being well aware of the issue, Western powers continue to coddle the Saudis or, at most, protest meekly from time to time.

For instance, a Wikileaks cable clearly quotes then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton saying “donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide.” She continues: “More needs to be done since Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaeda, the Taliban, LeT and other terrorist groups.” And it’s not just the Saudis: Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates are also implicated in the memo. Other cables released by Wikileaks outline how Saudi front companies are also used to fund terrorism abroad.

Evidently, the situation has not improved since Hillary Clinton was secretary of state. Late last year, Vice President Biden caused a stir by undiplomatically speaking the truth at an event at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, saying:

“Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria. The Turks were great friends... [and] the Saudis, the Emirates, etcetera. What were they doing?... 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, [they] were al-Nusra, and al-Qaeda, and the extremist elements of jihadis who were coming from other parts of the world.”

More recently, the Saudi role in promoting extremism has come under renewed scrutiny. Calls for declassifying the redacted 28 pages of the 9/11 congressional commission have been getting stronger. And statements from the lead author of the report, former Florida Sen. Bob Graham,

suggest they are being hidden because they “point a very strong finger at Saudi Arabia as the principal financier” of the 9/11 hijackers. He has been unusually explicit, “Saudi Arabia has not stopped its interest in spreading extreme Wahhabism. ISIS...is a product of Saudi ideals, Saudi money and Saudi organizational support, although now they are making a pretense of being very anti-ISIS.”

In fact, Saudi blogger Raif Badawi’s wife, Ensaf Haidar, made a similar observation about her husband’s flogging: “the Saudi government is behaving like Daesh [a derogatory Arabic term for ISIS].” About 2,500 Saudis are thought to be in ISIS’ ranks.

Ensaf Haidar’s quip exposes a deeper truth. One could reasonably argue that the House of Saud is simply a more established and diplomatic version of ISIS. It shares the extremist Wahhabi theofascism, the lack of human rights, intolerance, violent beheadings etc. — but with nicer buildings and roads. If ISIS were ever to become an established state, after a few decades one imagines it might resemble Saudi Arabia.

How does Saudi Arabia go about spreading extremism? The extremist agenda is not always clearly government-sanctioned, but in monarchies where the government money is spread around to various princes, there is little accountability for what the royal family does with their government funds. Much of the funding is via charitable organizations and is not military-related.

The money goes to constructing and operating mosques and madrassas that preach radical Wahhabism. The money also goes to training imams; media outreach and publishing; distribution of Wahhabi textbooks, and endowments to universities and cultural centers. A cable released by Wikileaks explains, regarding just one region of Pakistan:

Government and non-governmental sources claimed that financial support estimated at nearly 100 million USD annually was making its way to Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith clerics in the region from “missionary” and “Islamic charitable” organizations in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates ostensibly with the direct support of those governments.

Although the Wahhabi curriculum was modified after the 9/11 attacks, it remains backward and intolerant. Freedom House published a report on the revised curriculum, concluding that it “continues to propagate an ideology of hate toward the ‘unbeliever,’ which include Christians, Jews, Shiites, Sufis, Sunni Muslims who do not follow Wahhabi doctrine, Hindus, atheists and others.” This is taught not only domestically but also enthusiastically exported abroad.

Of course, initially there was complicity with the U.S. and Pakistan in promoting this ideology to counter the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In addition to the radical indoctrination, thousands of volunteer jihadis from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries were also dispatched to fight

alongside the mujahideen in Afghanistan. But it remains a complicated problem to this day because the politicians in the poor countries getting the Saudi and Gulf-Arab funds approve these extremist madrassas in part because the local authorities likely receive kickbacks.

In many places in poor Muslim countries the choice is now between going to an extremist madrassa or getting no education at all. Poverty is exploited to promote extremism. The affected areas include Pakistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, India and parts of Africa. The same Wikileaks [cable explains](#):

The network reportedly exploited worsening poverty in these areas of the province to recruit children into the divisions' growing Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith madrassa network from which they were indoctrinated into jihadi philosophy, deployed to regional training/indoctrination centers, and ultimately sent to terrorist training camps in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

The more tolerant indigenous versions of Islam cannot survive in the face of the tsunami of money being poured into promoting theo-fascist Wahhabism. This is a major problem that the Muslim world must urgently address.

But it is also a problem where the West can help by stopping its historical pandering and support of Middle East tyrants who spread this extremism. The most fundamental way to make the message clear to the House of Saud would be to threaten to stop buying oil from them. Given the relatively cheap oil prices these days it need not be an empty threat.

Eliminating the occasional militant leaders in drone and special-forces strikes [is of limited use in reducing extremism](#) if millions of radicals are being actively trained in Wahhabi madrassas across the Muslim world.

The fight against ISIS and Al-Qaeda is deeply ironic since these organizations were created and are sustained, in part, by funds we hand over to the Saudis and Gulf Arab nations to purchase their oil. And while France mourns its cartoonists and police officers, the French government is busy [signing military and nuclear deals](#) worth billions with the Saudis. If we continue down this road, it may well be a never-ending war.

The House of Saud works against the best interests of the West and the Muslim world. Muslim communities worldwide certainly need to eradicate fanatical Wahhabism from their midst, but this will be difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish if the West continues its support of the House of Saud. The monarchy must be modernized and modified — or simply uprooted and replaced. The House of Saud needs a thorough house cleaning.