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## How Saudi/Gulf Money Fuels Terror

By Daniel Lazare

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**Exclusive:** With the death toll in the Paris terror attacks still rising, French President Hollande is condemning an “act of war” by the Islamic State, but the underlying reality is that France’s rich friends in the Persian Gulf are key accomplices in the mayhem, writes Daniel Lazare.

In the wake of the latest terrorist outrage in Paris, the big question is not which specific group is responsible for the attack, but who’s responsible for the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in the first place. The answer that has grown increasingly clear in recent years is that it’s Western leaders who have used growing portions of the Muslim world as a playground for their military games and are now crying crocodile tears over the consequences.

This pattern had its beginnings in the 1980s in Afghanistan, where the Central Intelligence Agency and the Saudi royal family virtually invented modern jihadism in an effort to subject the Soviets to a Vietnam-style war in their own backyard. It was the case, too, in Iraq, which the United States and Great Britain invaded in 2003, triggering a vicious civil warfare between Shi’ites and Sunnis.



**Prince Bandar bin Sultan, then Saudi ambassador to the United States, meeting with President George W. Bush in Crawford, Texas, on Aug. 27, 2002. (White House photo)**

Today, it's the case in Yemen where the U.S. and France are helping Saudi Arabia in its massive air war against Houthi Shi'ites. And it's the case in Syria, the scene of the most destructive war game of them all, where Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states are channeling money and arms to Al Qaeda, the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL and Daesh), and similar forces with the full knowledge of the U.S.

Western leaders encourage this violence yet decry it in virtually the same breath. In April 2008, a Treasury official testified in a congressional hearing that "Saudi Arabia today remains the location from which more money is going to ... Sunni terror groups and the Taliban than from any other place in the world." [See Rachel Ehrenfeld, "Their Oil Is Thicker Than Our Blood," in Sarah N. Stern, ed., *Saudi Arabia and the Global Islamic Terrorist Network: America and the West's Fatal Embrace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 127.]

In December 2009, Hillary Clinton noted in a confidential diplomatic memo that "donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide." In October 2014, Joe Biden told students at Harvard's Kennedy School that "the Saudis, the emirates, etc. ... were so determined to take down [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war ... [that] they poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda."

Just last month, a *New York Times* editorial complained that Saudis, Qataris and Kuwaitis were continuing to funnel donations not only to Al Qaeda but to Islamic State as well.

Yet despite countless promises to shut down such funding, the spigots have remained wide open. The U.S. has not only acquiesced in such activities, moreover, but has actively participated in them. In June 2012, the *Times* wrote that the C.I.A. was working with the Muslim Brotherhood to channel Turkish, Saudi and Qatari-supplied arms to anti-Assad rebels.

Two months later, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported that Al Qaeda, Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood dominated the Syrian rebel movement, that their goal was to establish a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria” where Islamic State’s caliphate is now located, and that this is “exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition” – i.e. the West, Gulf states, and Turkey – “want in order to isolate the Syrian regime.”

More recently, the Obama administration made no objection when the Saudis supplied Al Nusra, Al Qaeda’s official Syrian affiliate, with high-tech TOW missiles in support of its offensive in Syria’s northern Idlib province. It did not complain when the Saudis vowed to step up aid to such groups in response to Russia’s intervention in support of the besieged Assad regime.

Two weeks ago, the *Times*’s Ben Hubbard noted that 50 American Special Operations troops injected into northern Syria have been assigned to work with Arab rebels who had previously collaborated with Al Nusra and – although Hubbard didn’t say so – would undoubtedly do so again as soon as the Americans had gone.

### **Working Hand-in-Glove**

While vowing eternal enmity against Al Qaeda, the U.S. and its Gulf allies thus work hand-in-glove with the same forces in pursuit of other goals. Yet now leaders from Washington to Riyadh are beside themselves with grief that the same groups are biting the hand that feeds them.

This is a pattern that has grown all too familiar in recent years. “Terrorism” is a well-nigh meaningless word that obscures and confuses more than it illuminates. The 9/11 attacks led to a “global war on terror” and, simultaneously, to a vast cover-up concerning those who were actually responsible for the deed.

As a curtain of silence descended around the U.S.-Saudi role in Afghanistan, where the Osama bin Laden network originated, the Bush administration spirited 140 Saudis, including some two dozen members of the Bin Laden family, out of the country after no more than cursory questioning by the F.B.I.

When Saudi regent Abdullah bin Abdulaziz – he would not formally assume the throne for another three years – visited George W. Bush’s Texas ranch in April 2002, the President barely mentioned the World Trade Center and cut short a reporter who insisted on bringing it up:

“Yes, I – the crown prince has been very strong in condemning those who committed the murder of U.S. citizens. We’re constantly working with him and his government on intelligence sharing and cutting off money ... the government has been acting, and I appreciate that very much.”

What Bush said was a lie. Just a month earlier, former FBI assistant director Robert Kallstrom had complained that the Saudis were dragging their feet with regard to the investigation: “It doesn’t look like they’re doing much, and frankly it’s nothing new.”

In April 2003, Philip Zelikow, the 9/11 commission’s neocon executive director, fired an investigator, Dana Leseman, when she proved too vigorous in probing the Saudi connection.

[See Philip Shenon, *The Commission: The Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation* (New York: Twelve, 2008), pp. 110-13.]

Strangest of all is what has happened to a 28-page chapter in an earlier joint congressional report dealing with the question of the Saudi complicity. While the report as a whole was heavily redacted, the chapter itself wound up entirely suppressed. Although Obama promised 9/11 widow Kristen Breitweiser shortly after taking office to see to it that it was made public, it remains under wraps.

Rather than identifying those responsible, Washington preferred that the American people remain in the dark. Instead of identifying the actual culprits, the Bush administration, backed up by the Democrats and the press, preferred to blame it all on vague and formless “evildoers” from another realm. The same thing happened following the Charlie Hebdo massacre last January. Amid thousands of “Je Suis Charlie” signs and mass demonstrations — featuring Benjamin Netanyahu, Nicolas Sarkozy and the Saudi ambassador — persistent reports of Saudi donations flowing to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the group that trained gunman Chérif Kouachi and apparently sponsored the assault, were ignored.

Reports that Riyadh has since collaborated with AQAP in its war against Shi’ite Houthis have met the same fate. As Saudi jets spread death and destruction across Yemen, Al Qaeda has gained control of the eastern city of Mukalla, an oil center and sea port with a population of 300,000, and has also taken control of portions of Aden as well, accumulating in the process an arsenal consisting of dozens of 55 armored vehicles and 22 tanks plus anti-aircraft missiles and other weaponry as well.

### **No Alarm Bells**

One would think that this would set off alarm bells in Washington, yet the result has been a collective shrug. The Obama administration continues to back Saudi Arabia in its assault on the Middle East’s poorest nation, providing it with technical back-up and naval support, while France, eager to supplant the U.S. as the kingdom’s chief weapons supplier, backs it as well.

French President Francois Hollande thus backs the kingdom that backs the forces that backed those who carried out the Charlie Hebdo massacre. He also backs a kingdom that allows donations to flow to ISIS, which he now identifies as responsible for the latest atrocities.

Hollande prefers to beat his breast and issue ringing calls for “compassion and solidarity” rather than actually doing something about the relationships that generate such attacks in the first place.

At its most basic level, this is a problem of oil, money and an American empire that stands paralyzed before the disaster it has created in the Middle East. When Obama issued his famous August 2011 call for regime change in Damascus — “For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside” — it seemed to be a no-brainer.

The insurgency was growing, the Ba’athists were hanging on by a thread, and it seemed only a matter of time before Assad met the same fate as Muammar Gaddafi. “We came, we saw, he

died,” Hillary Clinton would crow a few months later about Gaddafi, and so it seemed that Assad would soon meet his end at hands of a rebel mob, too.

But Assad proved more durable, mainly because he had the backing of a mass party that, despite corruption and ossification, still enjoyed a significant measure of popular support. The longer he has been able to stay in power, therefore, the more the U.S. has found itself caught up in an increasingly sectarian war by gulf-funded Sunni extremists.

Faced with a choice between Assad on one hand and ISIS and Al Qaeda on the other, Obama has dithered and delayed, refusing to commit himself wholeheartedly to the rebel cause but failing to object when his closest friends channel funds to groups that the U.S. officially regards as anathema.

Instead of defeating ISIS, this policy of neither-nor has allowed it fester and grow. The group is richer than ever, its troops travel about in shiny new Toyota pickups, and its technical prowess is also on the upswing. Two weeks ago, it apparently brought down a Russian airliner in the Sinai. On Thursday, it sent a pair of suicide bombers into a Shi‘ite neighborhood in Beirut, killing 43 people and wounding more than two hundred.

Now, according to French authorities, ISIS has sent a team of at least eight militants to shoot up various sites in Paris. In an apparent reference to Western bombing raids against ISIS targets in Syria, one gunman reportedly shouted during the assault on the Bataclan music hall, “What you are doing in Syria, you are going to pay for it now.”

This is a horror show made in Washington, Riyadh and the Élysée.

## **The Rising Right**

What is to be done? The events are a godsend for Marine Le Pen, who will undoubtedly use them to fuel the mass xenophobia that generates votes for the National Front. It is a boon as well for countless politicians in Eastern Europe, from Hungary’s Viktor Orban to Slovakia Prime Minister Robert Fico, who also benefits from growing anti-immigrant fervor.

In Poland, where President Andrzej Duda has denounced European Union refugee quotas and 25,000 ultra-right demonstrators recently paraded through Warsaw calling for “Poland for the Poles,” nationalists are also rubbing their hands with glee.

For weeks, right-wing websites and news outlets have been warning that ISIS was using the refugee wave to infiltrate fighters into the EU, and now they will be able to point to the Bataclan massacre and say that they were right.

It’s an argument that ordinary people will likely find compelling, which is why pointing out the role of Western governments in the debacle is vital. After raining down destruction on one Muslim nation after another, Western leaders can hardly be surprised when violence overflows into their own backyard.

Sealing off the borders à la Donald Trump or Nigel Farage may strike some voters as logical, but the more the U.S. and its allies impose “regime change” and mass terror on the Middle East, the greater will be the number of refugees seeking to escape. No matter how many barriers the EU puts up, growing numbers will find ways around them.

The same goes for the violence. No matter how hard the West tries to seal itself off against the disorders that it itself is creating, it will find that a cordon sanitaire is impossible to maintain. Saudi Arabia has quadrupled its arms purchases in recent years while the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council is now the third biggest military spender in the world.

This is wonderful news for arms manufacturers not to mention politicians desperate for an uptick in GDP, but somewhat less so for masses of ordinary people in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Paris who are now at the receiving end of all that weaponry and violence. The more the Western alliance and its Gulf “allies” insist on spreading chaos in the Middle East, the more xenophobia and right-wing reaction will be the upshot in Europe and the United States.