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## Saudi Arabia and Israel: An Axis of Convenience

By Dan Sanchez  
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Geopolitics makes strange bedfellows. Take Israel and Saudi Arabia for instance. The two Middle Eastern powers might be expected to have zero common ground. Israel is the arch-colonizer of Arabs and Muslims, while Saudi Arabia governs the motherland of the Arabs and the two capitals of Islam, Mecca and Medina. The two do not even have formal diplomatic relations.

Yet since 2006, and especially since the 2011 Arab Spring, Israel and Saudi Arabia have been close *de facto* allies in what might be called the Crescent Wars: a sustained assault against the “Shia Crescent” (Iran, Syria, Yemen, Hezbollah, and to some extent Iraq) by a US-led coalition (including both Western and Sunni Muslim forces).

Today’s Israeli-Saudi axis was facilitated by the Iraq War.

Israel has long loathed any Muslim state not in the pay and orbit of its patron the US as a dangerous potential champion of the occupied Palestinians. After the overthrow of Saddam’s Sunni regime in Iraq, the two remaining intransigently independent Muslim states (Iran and Syria) happened to have Shia regimes. The new Iraqi regime is also Shia-dominated. And, in spite of its sponsorship by the US, it is pro-Iran and not pro-Israel.

Israel also hates Iran and Syria for their support of Hezbollah, a powerful Shia militia based in Lebanon that for decades has frustrated Israeli designs on that neighboring country.

The fact that all of Israel's chief enemies now happen to be Shia is the reason its interests have become so tightly aligned with anti-Shia Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia is anti-Shia because it is a theocracy whose state religion is Wahhabism: a fundamentalist, militant strand of Sunni Islam that is virtually identical to the Salafist creed of Al Qaeda and ISIS. Both the Wahhabis and Salafis embrace the doctrine of *Takfir*; they consider Shia and other non-Sunnis to be apostates (non-Muslims), and therefore frequently worthy of divinely sanctioned slaughter.

Indeed Saudi wealth has poured into jihadi groups (including the Takfiris of Al Qaeda and ISIS) fighting to "purify" Syria of religious minorities and to overthrow and displace the Shia regime of Bashar al-Assad. For its part, Israel has served as the Takfiris' air force by bombing the Assad forces fighting Al Qaeda, and has even provided the terrorists with medical care. Israel wants Assad toppled, and Israeli officials have even clearly expressed their preference for Al Qaeda and ISIS over Assad.

The Saudis' Takfiri bigotry toward the Shia is given even greater weight by economic considerations. The vast majority of Saudi Arabia's oil wealth sits in land populated by the country's oppressed Shia minority. The Saudis' worst nightmare is that the Shia, inspired and supported by the Crescent, will secede, taking the oil with them. Indeed, the Saudis recently beheaded a popular Shia cleric who had called for doing just that unless the regime relented in its sectarian persecution. This execution has led to a total break in diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

And this economic state of affairs is not limited to The Kingdom. The fossil fuel resources of the entire Persian Gulf region are predominantly located under Shia populations. In Bahrain, for example, a minority Sunni government reigns over a majority Shia population and controls the country's vast oil wealth. When the downtrodden Shia took to the streets during the Arab Spring, the Saudis helped the regime to militarily crush the uprising.

Elsewhere in the peninsula, the Saudis have for months been bombing and blockading the desperately poor people of Yemen in order to reinstall a puppet dictator and to crush the new Shia regime of the Houthis. This war has greatly helped the Saudis' fellow Takfiris in AQAP (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) to conquer much of the country. And Israel has seconded the Saudis' defense of this war as necessary to counter the Iran/Yemen "axis," although neither has offered any proof that Iran is significantly supporting the Houthis.

Furthermore, Israel and the Saudis together are the chief opponents of the US-Iran nuclear deal. Israel has even given the green light for the sale of German tanks to the Saudis. In an article on the 2011 tank deal, *The New York Times* reported the following:

"Once viewed as a potential threat by Jerusalem, the government in Saudi Arabia is increasingly viewed as a guarantor of stability in a region in upheaval, as revolutionary fervor sweeps through the Middle East."

Yet, the axis of convenience between Israel and Saudi Arabia did not begin only recently with their mutual antipathy for the Shia. It extends back to the pre-origins of both states. This was explained recently in a fascinating essay on Mondoweiss by Nu'man Abd al-Wahid called "How Zionism helped create the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."

The axis began then and continues to this day, not because of fleeting strategic alignments, but because of two fundamental similarities. Both states have since their inception been agents of Western colonialism in the Middle East. And both are especially useful for Western aggression because both states are animated by virulent ideologies of bigotry and conquest: militant Wahhabism in the case of Saudi Arabia and militant Zionism in the case of Israel.

As Murray Rothbard wrote in his classic essay "War Guilt in the Middle East":

"The chronic Middle East crisis goes back—as do many crises—to World War I. The British, in return for mobilizing the Arab peoples against their oppressors of imperial Turkey, promised the Arabs their independence when the war was over. But, at the same time, the British government, with characteristic double-dealing, was promising Arab Palestine as a "National Home" for organized Zionism. These promises were not on the same moral plane: for in the former case, the Arabs were being promised their own land freed from Turkish domination; and in the latter, world Zionism was being promised a land most emphatically not its own. When World War I was over, the British unhesitatingly chose to keep the wrong promise, the one to world Zionism. Its choice was not difficult; if it had kept its promise to the Arabs, Great Britain would have had to pull gracefully out of the Middle East and turn that land over to its inhabitants; but, to fulfill its promise to Zionism, Britain had to remain as a conquering, imperial power ruling over Arab Palestine. That it chose the imperial course is hardly surprising."

However, in Arabia, as Wahid recounts, the British ran into a snag. Sharif Hussain bin Ali, the ruler of Hijaz in western Arabia, who had successfully led the Arab mobilization against the Ottomans, insisted on the British keeping their promise to the Arabs. After the war, Hussain refused to acquiesce to either Sykes-Picot (the partition of the Arab world into British and French protectorate spheres) or the implementation of the Balfour Declaration (Britain's consignment of Arab Palestine to Zionist colonization). Hussain would not sell out the Arab people, despite the intense bullying and bribe-offering of British diplomats, including Winston Churchill and that putative "champion of the Arabs" T.E. Lawrence (aka "Lawrence of Arabia").

Finally Britain had the Saudis give Hussain an offer he couldn't refuse. Ibn Saud, the Emir of Najd in eastern Arabia, had long been on Britain's payroll, but had already been largely crushed by the Ottomans before Hussain joined the fight. After the war, Churchill and Lawrence both threatened to unleash Ibn Saud and his fanatic Wahhabi followers against Hijaz if Hussain would not yield. After finally giving up on Hussain ever accepting Sykes-Picot and Balfour, the British made good on their threat and sicced their religiously rabid bulldog on Hussain's people. As Wahid wrote:

"Ibn Saud's Wahhabis committed their customary massacres, slaughtering women and children as well as going into mosques and killing traditional Islamic scholars. They captured the holiest

place in Islam, Mecca, in mid-October 1924. Sharif Hussain was forced to abdicate and went to exile...”

Ibn Saud, who was willing to play ball with Britain’s colonial designs on the Middle East, thus gained dominion over most of the Arabian Peninsula. As his reward, the British upgraded Ibn Saud’s Emirate to a Kingdom. A British functionary later came up with the name “Saudi Arabia.”

The Saudis midwived Israel by overthrowing and displacing a major early obstacle to the Zionist project in Palestine. And Zionism midwived Saudi Arabia when the former’s imperial patron granted the Arabian Peninsula to the House of Saud largely for the sake of Zionism. Israel and Saudi Arabia were born symbiotic twins out of the womb of the British Empire.

When the United States of America supplanted Britain at the head of the imperial Anglosphere, it inherited Israel and Saudi Arabia as colonial clients.

Israel and Saudi Arabia have been useful to its colonial patrons particularly because of their militant founding ideologies. Zionism’s ethno-religious supremacism and exclusivism impels Israel toward conquest, occupation, dispossession, and apartheid. Wahhabism’s religious fanaticism and sectarian bigotry impels Saudi Arabia toward domestic oppression, sectarian war, and the sponsorship of international jihad. Both, therefore, are generators of chronic conflict, which their Western patrons have used to excuse their never-ending colonial interventions.

Israel’s constant strife with its Muslim neighbors and Palestinian subjects were major factors in the American invasions of Lebanon (in the 80s) and Iraq (in the 90s and in 2003), and underlie America’s region-shattering Global War on Terror in general. And Saudi Arabia’s strife with its neighbors and subjects have been major factors in America’s interventions to secure the access of Western corporations to Arabian oil. The Saudis also played a leading role in the provision of funding and Wahhabi-indoctrinated recruits for US-sponsored jihads in Afghanistan (in the 80s) and Syria (today).

For its part, Israel is more than accepting of Saudi support for Takfiri jihad. This is of a piece with Israel’s long history of exploiting radical Islam. As I theorized in a recent essay discussing that history:

“Israeli hawks prefer ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Hamas to Saddam, Assad, and Arafat, because the people of the West are less likely to be willing to co-exist with the former than the latter. Especially as terrorist attacks and refugee crises mount in the West, the rise and reign of the terrorists may finally overcome public opposition to troop commitment, and necessitate the Western invasion and permanent occupation of the Greater Middle East, followed, of course, by its perpetual exploitation by, among other Washington favorites, Israel and Israeli corporations.”

That may be Israel’s long game for the Terror War. But what about the Saudis? They probably would much rather have the fellow Takfiris they are funding permanently ruling Syria, western Iraq, parts of Yemen, etc. For more on the Saudis’ motivations for sponsoring international jihad, see this 2014 essay of mine.

In any case, the Saudi-Israeli axis of convenience is probably seen by both parties as temporary, and the two will eventually turn on each other after their common foes are destroyed. Until then, Zionist Israel and Wahhabist Saudi Arabia will surely continue their century-long informal alliance as the West's pair of colonial cat's-paws tasked with mauling the Middle East.