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To really combat terror, end support for Saudi Arabia

Ramped up rhetoric on security makes no sense so long as the west cosies up to dictatorships that support fundamentalism

Owen Jones

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The so-called war on terror is nearly 13 years old, but which rational human being will be cheering its success? We've had crackdowns on civil liberties across the world, tabloid-fanned generalizations about Muslims and, of course, military interventions whose consequences have ranged from the disastrous to the catastrophic. And where have we ended up? Wars that Britons believe have made them less safe; jihadists too extreme even for al-Qaida's tastes running amok in Iraq and Syria; and nations like Libya succumbing to Islamist militias. There are failures, and then there are calamities.

But as the British government ramps up the terror alert to "severe" and yet more anti-terror legislation is proposed, some reflection after 13 years of disaster is surely needed. One element has been missing, and that is the west's relationship with Middle Eastern dictatorships that have played a pernicious role in the rise of Islamist fundamentalist terrorism. And no wonder: the west is militarily, economically and diplomatically allied with these often brutal regimes, and our media all too often reflects the foreign policy objectives of our governments.

Take Qatar. There is evidence that, as the US magazine The Atlantic puts it, "Qatar's military and economic largesse has made its way to Jabhat al-Nusra", an al-Qaida group operating in

Syria. Less than two weeks ago, Germany's development minister, Gerd Mueller, was slapped down after pointing the finger at Qatar for funding Islamic State (Isis).

While there is no evidence to suggest Qatar's regime is directly funding Isis, powerful private individuals within the state certainly are, and arms intended for other jihadi groups are likely to have fallen into their hands. According to a secret memo signed by Hillary Clinton, released by Wikileaks, Qatar has the worst record of counter-terrorism cooperation with the US.

And yet, where are the western demands for Qatar to stop funding international terrorism or being complicit in the rise of jihadi groups? Instead, Britain arms Qatar's dictatorship, selling it millions of pounds worth of weaponry including "crowd-control ammunition" and missile parts. There are other reasons for Britain to keep stumm, too. Qatar owns lucrative chunks of Britain such as the Shard, a big portion of Sainsbury's and a slice of the London Stock Exchange.

Then there's Kuwait, slammed by Amnesty International for curtailing freedom of expression, beating and torturing demonstrators and discriminating against women. Hundreds of millions have been channelled by wealthy Kuwaitis to Syria, again ending up with groups like Jabhat al-Nusra.

Kuwait has refused to ban the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, a supposed charity designated by the US Treasury as an al-Qaida bankroller. David Cohen, the US Treasury's undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, has even described Kuwait as the "epicentre of fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria". As Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, an associate fellow at Chatham House, told me: "High profile Kuwaiti clerics were quite openly supporting groups like al-Nusra, using TV programmes in Kuwait to grandstand on it." All of this is helped by lax laws on financing and money laundering, he says.

But don't expect any concerted action from the British government. Kuwait is "an important British ally in the region", as the British government officially puts it. Tony Blair has become the must-have accessory of every self-respecting dictator, ranging from Kazakhstan to Egypt; Kuwait was Tony Blair Associates' first client in a deal worth £27m. Britain has approved hundreds of arms licences to Kuwait since 2003, recently including military software and anti-riot shields.

And then, of course, there is the dictatorship in Saudi Arabia. Much of the world was rightly repulsed when Isis beheaded the courageous journalist James Foley. Note, then, that Saudi Arabia has beheaded 22 people since 4 August. Among the "crimes" that are punished with beheading are sorcery and drug trafficking.

Around 2,000 people have been killed since 1985, their decapitated corpses often left in public squares as a warning. According to Amnesty International, the death penalty "is so far removed from any kind of legal parameters that it is almost hard to believe", with the use of torture to extract confessions commonplace. Shia Muslims are discriminated against and women are deprived of basic rights, having to seek permission from a man before they can even travel or take up paid work.

Even talking about atheism has been made a terrorist offence and in 2012, 25-year-old Hamza Kashgari was jailed for 20 months for tweeting about the prophet Muhammad. Here are the fruits of the pact between an opulent monarchy and a fanatical clergy.

This human rights abusing regime is deeply complicit in the rise of Islamist extremism too. Following the Soviet invasion, the export of the fundamentalist Saudi interpretation of Islam – Wahhabism – fused with Afghan Pashtun tribal code and helped to form the Taliban. The Saudi monarchy would end up suffering from blowback as al-Qaida eventually turned against the kingdom.

Chatham House professor Paul Stevens says: “For a long time, there was an unwritten agreement ... whereby al-Qaida’s presence was tolerated in Saudi Arabia, but don’t piss inside the tent, piss outside.” Coates Ulrichsen warns that Saudi policy on Syria could be “Afghanistan on steroids”, as elements of the regime have turned a blind eye to where funding for anti-Assad rebels ends up.

Although Saudi Arabia has given \$100m (£60m) to the UN anti-terror programme and the country’s grand mufti has denounced Isis as “enemy number one”, radical Salafists across the Middle East receive ideological and material backing from within the kingdom. According to Clinton’s leaked memo, Saudi donors constituted “the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide”.

But again, don’t expect Britain to act. Our alliance with the regime dates back to 1915, and Saudi Arabia is the British arms industry’s biggest market, receiving £1.6bn of military exports. There are now more than 200 joint ventures between UK and Saudi companies worth \$17.5bn.

So much rhetoric about terrorism; so many calls to act. Yet Britain’s foreign policy demonstrates how empty such words are. Our allies are up to their necks in complicity with terrorism, but as long as there is money to be made and weapons to sell, our rulers’ lips will remain stubbornly sealed.