

## Five Saudi Imperial Projects the West has Slept Through

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By Stanley A. Weiss

Horrified by the news that Saudi Arabia would set a record for beheadings in 2015 while continuing to fund radical Islamic groups across the world, I wrote a column last October arguing that it was time for the United States to reconsider its 70-year relationship with the kingdom in Riyadh. After the piece was posted, one of the friends I heard from was Terence Ward, author of the internationally praised memoir, *Searching for Hassan*.

Terry knows about Saudi Arabia: while born in Colorado, he spent his childhood in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Not only does he have a rich understanding of the deep conflicts within Islam and between nations in the Middle East, but as a man who is fluent in six languages -- including Arabic and Farsi -- his understanding of the subtleties of those conflicts go well beyond that of most Westerners.

As tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have rapidly escalated this month over Riyadh's execution of a high-profile Shiite cleric, Terry reached out with a thoughtful perspective on Saudi Arabia and the West. I print it here in full:

Since 2001, Western leaders have discretely avoided the naked truth--today's Islamic terrorism is deeply rooted in the Saudi Wahhabi faith. First with al-Qaeda's Twin Tower attack and now with the Paris blitz by ISIS, the West's rush for revenge ignores those roots yet again.

Both Al-Qaeda and ISIS needed failed states to create their base: first in Afghanistan, then in northern Iraq and eastern Syria. But to flourish, they needed funding and ideology: all imported from Saudi Arabia.

To be blunt, where is decapitation a public sport? Only in Riyadh and Raqqa. Growing up in Saudi Arabia, I used to witness crowds gather on Friday in "chop-chop square" to watch the medieval spectacle. The recent 47 beheadings remind us again of this uniquely Saudi custom. Now, it has now been exported to Syria where YouTube clips inform the world. But they share more than executions. Few know that as Syrian and Iraqi towns fell to ISIS, Saudi textbooks replaced what was on classroom desks before. So, if any Western leaders seriously want to end the radicalization of young Muslims, they must look no further than the father of the radical faith followed by

both terror groups--it lies in the Saudi religious industrial complex. Wahhabism. In Saudi Arabia there is no church, synagogue nor Hindu temple. Wahhabism is not a religion of tolerance. The chilling fact is that in three decades, the Saudis have launched five imperial projects--all sources of today's jihadists.

The first project in Pakistan began when General Zia ul-Haq, after seizing power in 1977, imposed Shari'a law and then gave carte blanche to create countless Saudi-funded Wahhabi madrasas--Islamic schools--across the country to indoctrinate young children and fill the gap of a collapsed education system. Targeting refugee camps of vulnerable Afghans fleeing the Soviet invasion, the Wahhabi movement found its base.

The second project in Afghanistan was born in these Pakistan's refugee camps when a new generation came of age calling themselves "the students" or "Taliban." In 1994, Mullah Omar and 50 madrasa students launched out from Quetta as a fighting force crossing the border, seizing Kandahar, and then taking Kabul in 1996. By 1997, Saudi employees were traveling for free as tourists on government-paid holidays to visit the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan with their families so they could witness the "true Islam." Mullah Omar was invited on Haj by the Saudi monarch in 1998. He then ordered the Bamiyan Buddhas blown apart in March 2001, in keeping with the iconoclast Saudi vision. The free tourist trips from Riyadh and Al-Hasa ended abruptly on September 11 that same year.

The third project was al-Qaeda's global jihad financed by Wahhabi funders that began with financing foreign fighters in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan and climaxed with the Twin Towers attack. It's enough to remember that 15 of 19 hijackers as well as its founder Bin Laden, all hailed from Saudi Arabia.

The fourth imperial project is termed ISIS, ISIL or DAESH. Its mother was America's Iraq invasion. Its father was Saudi Arabia's eager Wahhabi funders and a defiant ideology that capitalized on the Sunni humiliation in Iraq and Syria (NYT op-ed by Kamel Daoud). Now, the Sunni-Shiite conflagration is tearing apart both countries and the region is ablaze with four civil wars. Of course,

Saudis argue this was all started to combat Iran's imperial ambitions but the truth is that only Sunnis have mastered their macabre monopoly on suicide bombings. This is the terror that was exported to Paris.

The fifth imperial project lies in Western Europe--in all madrasas funded with Saudi money and staffed with Wahhabi-trained imams from Paris to Brussels, Antwerp and Rotterdam, from Marseilles to Birmingham. Thousands of mosques and schools have trained a new generation of young Muslims in the rigid and intolerant faith imported from Riyadh, without any local government supervision. And now these seeds planted by Saudi Arabia are bearing fruit under a newly re-named Salafist banner. This Salafi term has been cleverly promoted to disguise any connection to Wahhabism or the Saudi origins, and it has worked. International journalists now use solely the word Salafi as if describing a widespread conservative current in Islam today.

Over forty years ago, Belgium's King Baudoin cut a deal with Saudi Arabia's King Faisal. In exchange for cheap oil, Baudoin gave the Saudis a 99-year lease on the former Oriental Pavilion for the Grande Mosque. At the same time, the Belgians allowed their Saudi friends to train Muslim imams to preach to the growing numbers of Maghrebi immigrants coming into the country. This gave the House of Saud carte blanche to spread the message of Wahhabism in rigid religious schools, setting up tension between the more moderate and largely Moroccan tradition and the Saudi-financed mosques. Now there are 77 mosques in Brussels alone.

From the 2001 assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the anti-Taliban leader in Afghanistan, to the 2004 Madrid train bombings, from the Paris shootings at the magazine Charlie Hebdo, to last year's killings at Brussels' Jewish museum and this summer's foiled shooting spree on a high-speed train, until finally, the Paris massacres, all investigators' lines of inquiry have led to Europe's "ground zero" of terrorism - the Brussels suburb of Molenbeek. This should not be surprising. Only last year, Belgium was riveted by the trial of 46 people who were found guilty of belonging to Sharia4Belgium, a group that recruited volunteers to fight in Syria with ISIS.

The two elements that all five imperial projects share are Saudi financing (private and governmental), and the Wahhabi creed--extremist, fundamentalist, and exclusionist. This creed is surprisingly new to Islam. Only 200 years old, it carries the name of its firebrand founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. The Christian equivalent would be a union of two groups: the Jehovah

Witness and the Ku Klux Klan. The Wahhabi creed views all other Muslims as deviant heretics, deserving no mercy. Moderate Sunnis, Sufis, Shia, Ismailis, Druze, Yazidis, Alawites, even the whirling dervishes are all enemies, fallen Muslims. Of course, non-Muslims fall under the same umbrella of loathing and apostasy. No common humanity exists. There is no dialogue possible. Their Shariah is the only covenant. Non-believers are expendable.

Make no mistake; the Saudi Wahhabis are on a global mission of conversion. Their dream is to change forever a faith that once was tolerant, when Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived side by side in the cosmopolitan Levant's multi-cultural mélange of dialects and faiths from Alexandria to Beirut, from Damascus to Istanbul.

Yet, in the non-Arabic world of Southeast Asia--in Indonesia with over 190 million Muslim faithful--the mood is different. Islam arrived there with Persian and Gujarati merchants who sailed into tropical ports with their mystical Sufi faith. This is why Islam spread so quickly. Had the merchants offered the rigid Wahhabi message instead, there would have been no buyers.

Now, it is only in Indonesia that a repudiation of the Islamic State has surfaced from Indonesia's NU party that numbers 50 million Muslims. Their recent film of ISIS beheadings features the voice-over of former Indonesian president, Abdurrahman Wahid, singing a Javanese mystical poem:

"Many who memorize the Quran and Hadith love to condemn others as infidels while ignoring their own infidelity to God, their hearts and minds still mired in filth."

This campaign for a liberal, pluralistic Islam comes from a country with a rich Hindu and Buddhist past, where Sunnis and Shias live together in harmony. This Islam stresses nonviolence, inclusiveness and acceptance of other religions. All commentators and pundits who ask for a "Reformation in Islam", need look no further. This Islam exists in Indonesia. And it is the antidote to jihadism.

Few know that for 1,000 years the holy city of Mecca was the center of the Sufi universe, where music, dance and ecstatic prayer celebrated the divine and faithful gathered at shrines of saints. When the Wahhabi-backed House of Saud took full control of Hijaz, Mecca and Medina in 1924, the state of Saudi Arabia was established with Wahhabism as its official religion. In less than 100 years, the Saud family and their Wahhabi benefactors erased that rich, mystic past as well as historical sites like the Prophet's

house in Mecca and that of his daughter Fatimeh. The homes of the Prophet's wives' are now parking lots. For all those pilgrims on Haj, Mecca has been cleansed of its multi-cultural history.

Virtually every aspect and corner of modern Islam has now been penetrated by Wahhabi influence, thanks to \$200 billion spent over the last 30 years in a strategic campaign to promote Wahhabism around the world. Thousands of madrasas -- funded by Saudis - have indoctrinated countless young minds with their "pure Wahhabi Islam" in Belgium, France, Holland, Germany, Bosnia, Kosovo, and the UK as well as the Arab World. At the moment, the economies of the Middle East and North Africa are not creating job opportunities for tens of millions of young students of both sexes who are the ones most easily vulnerable to be converted and recruited.

In turn, Saudi money has strategically silenced virtually all criticism in the international media. Saudi ownership of the largest Arab media outlets (newspapers, magazines, and TV channels) has been crucial in keeping their imperial projects from being discussed openly in the Arab World. And Saudi and Qatari money has bought the deafening silence of Western politicians. Robust sales of military weaponry and prime real estate in major capitals from Rome to Paris and London, has quieted any visible critics. Quite simply, they are not published. With each passing day, the royal house of Saud plays a dangerous double game - posing as allies of the West, while allowing funding to pour into the terrorist networks. This way they keep criticism from zealous Wahhabi clerics at bay. Sicilians pay for "protection" in Palermo the same way. Ironically, ten years ago, on July 13, 2005, US Treasury undersecretary Stuart Levey pointed out that rich Saudi individuals were a "significant source" of global Islamist terror funding. Today, nothing has changed.

The conclusions are chilling. Until the Saudi religious roots in today's crisis are unearthed and examined in the cold light of day, history will only repeat itself from Raqaa to Paris, from Riyadh to Brussels, from Karachi to San Bernardino. As George Soros reminds us, we also live in an "Age of Fallibility." Our assumptions of reality must be re-assessed each day. Turning a blind eye to Saudi Arabia's imperial ambitions since 9/11, has led us to this moment of reflection. Meanwhile, Western leaders should take note of the courageous Indonesians who so profoundly denounce ISIS and Wahhabism. There is indeed a grand difference between Muslims.

Unless the Saudis show tolerance and allow churches, temples and synagogues to be built in Arabia (which is highly unlikely), the EU and the US should take a firm position and legally impose a ban on all Saudi funding--public and private--destined for mosques and Muslim schools. American leaders need to openly speak about Wahhabism (just as they did with Baathism) and end the deafening silence purchased by petro-dollars. From Capital Hill to Foggy Bottom, an oft-whispered claim insists that the royal family is the lesser of two evils. This smacks of irony. The House of Saud has always been Wahhabi. Now, the West must wake to the coming storm. And, we all must pray that no conspiracy is afoot within Pakistan's Intelligence Agency--with its own embedded Wahhabi sympathizers--to offer ISIS their ultimate dream: a nuclear weapon that could become the mother of all suicide bombs.