



Written Statement for House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence

Assessing the U.S.-Saudi Security and Intelligence Relationship

By Mr. Ali H. Soufan

Founder of The Soufan Center

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About The Soufan Center

The Soufan Center (TSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis, and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. TSC fills a niche-role by producing independent, quality research and hosting proactive conversations in order to effectively equip thought leaders, policy makers, governments, bi- and multilateral institutions, media, and those in the non-profit and academic communities to engage in strategic security-related practices. Our work focuses on a broad range of complex security issues—from international and domestic terrorism, to humanitarian crisis analysis, to refugee and immigrant issues, and more.

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About Ali Soufan

Ali Soufan is the Founder of The Soufan Center. Mr. Soufan is a former FBI Supervisory Special Agent who investigated and supervised highly sensitive and complex international terrorism cases, including the East Africa Embassy Bombings, the attack on the USS Cole, and the events surrounding 9/11. He is the Chief Executive Officer of The Soufan Group and Founder of The Soufan Center.



Friend or Foe? Assessing the U.S.-Saudi Security and Intelligence Relationship

Testimony of Mr. Ali Soufan,
Founder of The Soufan Center

Before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
United States House of Representatives

Friday, September 11, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Schiff, ranking member Nunes, and distinguished members: Thank you for hearing my testimony today.

During this hearing on the U.S.-Saudi security and intelligence relationship my aim is to provide an overview of how the United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia has evolved over time, specifically with regard to counterterrorism (CT) cooperation. On the somber nineteen-year anniversary of the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on the U.S. Homeland, in which nearly 3,000 innocent Americans were killed, we are reminded of the loss we suffered that fateful day and the deadly threat posed by the ideology of Salafi-jihadism. Today, nineteen years to the day of one of the darkest days in our nation's history, we have spent untold trillions of dollars, and lost thousands of lives in the name of counterterrorism. What do we have to show for it? Despite this loss of blood and treasure, the threat is far from eradicated. On the contrary, the number of jihadis worldwide has grown exponentially, due in large part to the toxic ideology of Salafi-jihadism exported by Saudi Arabia to countries and regions around the world, from North Africa to Southeast Asia and beyond.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.

¹ No official number exists for the combined cost of the "Global War on Terror," but estimates range between \$3 trillion and \$6 trillion (National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2019; the Costs of War project at Brown University's Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs).



Based on my professional experience in counterterrorism with the dedication to keeping America safe, I draw three main conclusions about the United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia, specifically as it relates to CT cooperation. **First**, the threat stemming from the global Salafi-jihadist movement has evolved considerably since the September 11 attacks, due in large part to the attractiveness of the ideology and the geopolitical conflicts plaguing the Middle East, which feed individual grievances and play into the jihadists' narrative. **Second**, despite Saudi Arabia's pledges to combat extremism both at home and abroad, Riyadh is merely paying lip service to such promises and should not be considered a fully reliable, forthcoming, or trustworthy CT partner for the United States. There are times when U.S. and Saudi interests overlap. However, Saudi Arabia's actions directly contribute to some of the key drivers of radicalization and terrorism recruitment—and such actions have arguably grown more acute under the leadership of Saudi Arabia's de-facto ruler, crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Reliable Saudi CT partners that the United States had for the majority of the so-called "Global War on Terrorism" have been purged by MBS, leaving the future of the relationship uncertain and vulnerable to the whims of a mercurial leader. **Third**, beyond CT cooperation, the U.S.-Saudi relationship has become a one-way street, where the Kingdom acts with impunity and the United States agrees to look the other way while dismissing egregious Saudi misdeeds. Washington's policy toward Riyadh has been inconsistent, often failing to hold the Kingdom accountable according to our values and interests, which negatively impacts our international standing, and, by extension, impedes our global counterterrorism efforts in the region.

THE CURRENT STATE OF GLOBAL JIHAD AND LESSONS LEARNED

Almost two decades since the invasion of Afghanistan, the global Salafi-jihadist movement we sought to defeat is stronger than it was on the eve of 9/11. While al-Qaeda's ability to strike the U.S. homeland has been degraded, the group continues to destabilize weak and fragile states by prolonging civil wars and insurgencies. So while the threat has changed, it has not gone away. On the eve of 9/11, al-Qaeda had 400 members who had pledged *bay'ah* (allegiance) to Osama bin Laden. Today, the organization has more than 40,000 members and boast affiliates spanning the globe.² This number does not even include al-Qaeda's noxious progeny, the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). President Trump has declared victory over ISIS with the collapse of the territorial caliphate and the death of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In reality, as the Trump administration is seeking to withdraw troops from Iraq, a May 2020 report details how ISIS has increased its operational tempo in the country since 2019.³ Of the 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters who traveled to join ISIS, around one-third have already returned to their countries of origin and one-third remain, either in detention camps or still actively fighting for the terrorist group.⁴ ISIS continues to

² Seth Jones et al., "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), November 20, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-salafi-jihadist-threat>.

³ See, for example: Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019-2020," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 26, 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/remaining-and-expanding-the-recovery-of-islamic-state-operations-in-iraq-in-2019-2020/>; Alissa J. Rubin, Lara Jakes, and Eric Schmitt, "ISIS Attacks Surge in Iraq Amid Debate on U.S. Troop Levels," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/10/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-strategic-dialogue-troops.html>.

⁴ "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," *The Soufan Center*, October 24, 2017, <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/beyond-caliphate/>.



direct attacks against the West, including targeting the United States. In April of this year, authorities thwarted an ISIS-directed attack against U.S. military bases in Germany.⁵

While ISIS is rebuilding, al-Qaeda continues to operate in the shadows. A recent report from the UN stated “Al-Qaida affiliates are stronger than [ISIS] in many conflict zones, especially the Sahel, Somalia, Yemen and the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic.” Both al-Qaeda Central and its affiliates have expressed an enduring determination to strike the United States. On last year’s anniversary of 9/11, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called for attacks against the U.S. homeland.⁶ Critically, homegrown violent extremism continues to threaten the United States, whereby the hateful ideology disseminated by al-Qaeda and ISIS inspires would-be jihadists to mount attacks against American citizens.⁷

How did we arrive at this point? In the arena of post 9-11 counterterrorism efforts, the United States has enjoyed ample tactical successes that amount to strategic failures. Tactically, there is nothing we cannot accomplish; bin Laden, al-Baghdadi, and senior leadership of both organizations have either been neutralized or placed behind bars; the physical Caliphate is defeated; and crucially, we have not suffered a large-scale terrorist attack anywhere close to the scale of 9/11 in nineteen years. Strategically, however, we have failed to expunge the appeal of the Salafi-jihadist ideology globally. Today, the hateful narrative peddled by bin Laden and those of his ilk has metastasized and festered in the hearts and minds of people living in countries from across the Arab and Islamic world.

In efforts to counter al-Qaeda and ISIS, I have identified three crucial drivers of extremism that have served to fundamentally transform the appeal of these organizations’ message on a global scale. First, the proliferation of Wahhabi/Salafi teachings throughout Muslim majority countries, largely bankrolled by Saudi Arabia. Second, sectarianism has become *the* geopolitical currency to advance political goals in the Middle East and beyond. Specifically, the struggle for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran has pitted Sunni against Shia, and terrorist organizations, on both side of the sectarian divide, exploit sectarianism to leverage recruitment and as a theological justification for violence. Third, geopolitical conflicts provide oxygen for terrorist organizations to freely operate, from the Sahel to the Indian subcontinent.

THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA AND COUNTERTERRORISM

The United States and Saudi Arabia have a longstanding relationship built around counterterrorism cooperation. In the post-9/11 era, there have been some major successes resulting from this partnership, particularly in countering the original al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the early to mid-2000s.⁸ With a massive operating budget and assistance from British Special Forces and the U.S. intelligence community, Saudi Arabia was able to crush al-Qaeda in the Kingdom, as Saudi

⁵ Loveday Morris and Luisa Beck, “Islamic State Cell Plotted Attacks on U.S. Bases in Germany, Prosecutors Say,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/islamic-state-cell-plotted-attacks-on-us-bases-in-germany-prosecutors-say/2020/04/15/228a54a4-7efe-11ea-84c2-0792d8591911_story.html.

⁶ “On 9/11, al Qaeda Leader Calls for Attacks on U.S. and Slams Jihad ‘Backtrackers,’” *CBS News*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/september-11-attacks-anniversary-al-qaeda-leader-ayman-al-zawahiri-calls-for-attacks-on-us-today-2019-09-11/>.

⁷ Christopher Wray, “Statement Before the House Judiciary Committee,” Testimony, Federal Bureau of Investigation, February 5, 2020, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/fbi-oversight-020520>.

⁸ Bruce Riedel and Bilal Y. Saab, “Al-Qaeda’s Third Front: Saudi Arabia,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 31:2, Spring 2008, pp.33-46.



jihadists were captured, killed, or fled to other theatres, especially Iraq.⁹ Riyadh has also pledged its support and cooperation in countering another form of terrorism, Shiite extremism, which is primarily backed by Iran through its proxy network with a presence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and even extending to Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ Iran's sponsorship of terrorism presents a potent security threat to U.S. interests and allies in the Middle East, especially Israel.

Counterterrorism success was in some ways personality-driven, however, owing in part to Mohammed bin Nayef (MBN), then minister of the interior, and Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, then chief of intelligence.¹¹ Both of these individuals have been sidelined by MBS during his rise to power.¹² MBN has been swept up in manufactured corruption charges as a power play to minimize his influence.¹³ Another longtime favorite of U.S. intelligence, MBN's deputy Saad al-Jabri, was never accepted by MBS' inner circle, including the Crown Prince's trusted aide, Saud al-Qahtani.¹⁴ The relationship between al-Jabri and MBS deteriorated to the point that MBS reportedly sent a team of assassins to Canada, where al-Jabri had fled, to kill him.¹⁵ With its former leadership, Saudi Arabia made practical steps in improving its CT cooperation with the United States, but since MBS' rise to power he has eviscerated the institutions of any critics to his rule—under the guise of corruption—including long-term trusted U.S. partners. This hollowing out of national security and other institutions in the Saudi government has taken a toll on CT cooperation with the United States, even if both sides are hesitant to admit as much.

Saudi Arabia has made progress in countering terrorism financing, though challenges remain. In July 2020, the U.S.-Saudi inducted Terrorist Financing Targeting Center (TFTC), based in Riyadh, announced the designations of entities and individuals linked to ISIS. The sanctions, however, are more symbolic than substantive, since the U.S. Treasury Department had already unilaterally sanctioned all the ISIS-linked individuals and entities—further adding to the criticism that the TFTC was too enamored with creating headlines than making tangible progress in the field of countering terrorism financing.¹⁶ In 2017, Saudi Arabia undermined U.S. CT interests by blocking efforts to

⁹ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p.217.

¹⁰ See, for example: Colin Clarke and Phillip Smyth, "The Implications of Iran's Expanding Shi'a Foreign Fighter Network," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, November 27, 2017, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-implications-of-irans-expanding-shia-foreign-fighter-network/>; "Iran's Playbook: Deconstructing Tehran's Regional Strategy," *The Soufan Center*, May 14, 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/irans-playbook-deconstructing-tehrans-regional-strategy/>.

¹¹ Bruce Riedel, *Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States Since FDR*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018, p.152.

¹² Madawi al-Rasheed, "Why King Salman Must Replace M.B.S.," *New York Times*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/opinion/saudi-arabia-jamal-khashoggi-crown-prince-murder-king-salman-must-replace-mbs-stability.html>.

¹³ David Ignatius, "The Dazzling Rise and Tragic Fall of Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Nayef," *Washington Post*, July 5, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/05/dazzling-rise-tragic-fall-saudi-arabias-mohammed-bin-nayef/>.

¹⁴ Bradley Hope and Justin Scheck, *Blood and Oil: Mohammed Bin Salman's Ruthless Quest for Global Power*, New York: Hachette, 2020, p.87.

¹⁵ Ben Hubbard and Mark Mazzetti, "Former Saudi Official Accuses the Crown Prince of Trying to Kill Him," *New York Times*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/world/middleeast/saudi-prince-mohammed-lawsuit-aljabri.html>.

¹⁶ "IntelBrief: Recent Sanctions against the Islamic State: Symbolic or Substantive?," *The Soufan Center*, July 28, 2020, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-recent-sanctions-against-the-islamic-state-symbolic-or-substantive/>.



impose multilateral sanctions under the UN Security Council on ISIS-affiliates in Saudi Arabia, the Sinai, and the Caucasus.¹⁷ Teaming up with Russia, Saudi Arabia ensured that Senegal (a non-permanent voting member at the time) would vote against the resolution.

Saudi Arabia has supported U.S.-led CT missions, such as the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, although the Kingdom's commitment to rolling back ISIS' global footprint has been less straightforward. In support of the mission, Saudi Arabia pledged \$1.5 billion to support projects of reconstruction in Iraq.¹⁸ However, Saudi nationals constituted one of the biggest groups of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) who traveled to join ISIS, numbering above 3,000.¹⁹ Until recently, the second highest-ranking member in ISIS, Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, was a Saudi national (he was killed in a U.S. operation in close coordination with the Syrian Democratic Forces the day after ISIS leader al-Baghdadi was targeted and killed).²⁰ Exporting FTFs taps into Saudi Arabia's historical record on how the Kingdom dealt with extremists pre-9/11. Known radicals, including bin Laden, were pushed to leave the country, encouraged to join conflicts like Afghanistan, Chechnya, and the Balkans. Myopically, the Saudis sought to export their most violent citizens with little concern for the potential blowback.

In short, the United States and Saudi Arabia have reached a critical inflection point in their relationship. As MBS continues his attempt to consolidate power, U.S. policymakers must take a step back and assess his track record, which has been characterized by a litany of foreign policy disasters. His behavior is erratic and his grasp of security issues is tenuous, at best.²¹ Accordingly, MBS cannot be trusted, especially as most of his time is apparently spent plotting against Saudi dissidents living abroad, rather than trying to gain a more detailed understanding of the issues that form the core of the U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism partnership.²²

Critically, when comparing Saudi Arabia's progress in CT efforts with actions that directly or indirectly enable terrorist organizations, recruitment, and the spread of extremist narratives, it appears Riyadh is only paying lip service of earning its status as a reliable CT partner of the United States. Saudi Arabia's actions of exporting Wahhabism around the globe, tapping into and exacerbating sectarianism in the Middle East, and aggravating the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, all

¹⁷ Joby Warrick, "As Trump Prepared for Riyadh Visit, Saudis Blocked U.S. on Terrorist Sanctions," *Washington Post*, May 20, 2017, sec. National Security, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/as-trump-prepared-for-riyadh-visit-saudis-blocked-us-on-terrorist-sanctions/2017/05/19/3a91eedc-3cd4-11e7-a058-dbb23c75d82_story.html.

¹⁸ "Saudi Arabia," *The Global Coalition Against Daesh*, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/partner/saudi-arabia/>.

¹⁹ "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," *The Soufan Center*, October 24, 2017, <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/beyond-caliphate/>.

²⁰ Ben Hubbard and Karam Shoumali, "Likely Successor to Dead ISIS Leader Also Reported Killed," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/27/world/middleeast/al-baghdadi-successor-reported-killed.html>; Humeyra Pamuk, "U.S. Confirms Killing of Baghdadi's Right-Hand Man in Syria: Official," *Reuters*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-baghdadi-spokesman-idUSKBN1X726R>.

²¹ "Is Mohammed Bin Salman Leading Saudi Arabia Into the Abyss?" *Soufan Center IntelBrief*, April 29, 2020, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-is-mohammed-bin-salman-leading-saudi-arabia-into-the-abyss/>.

²² David Ignatius, "The Saudi Crown Prince, Interpol, and an Alleged Assassination Plot," *Washington Post*, August 6, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-saudi-crown-prince-interpol-and-an-alleged-assassination-plot/2020/08/06/b172b3a6-d821-11ea-9c3b-dfc394c03988_story.html.



serve as a boon for organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS, and indirectly empowers Iran's Shia proxies. These actions are primarily based on a geopolitical conflict with Iran, and the consequences seen as a necessary casualty in order to limit Iran's ambitions and influence in the region—something Saudi Arabia perceives as a direct threat to its very survival. Occasionally, in order to curtail Iranian influence in key locations, Saudi Arabia has even gone so far as funding and arming jihadis, as occurred at various points in Syria and Yemen.²³ Indeed, Iran deploys similar tactics to advance Tehran's interests in the region to create the so-called “Axis of Resistance,” engineered by the late Qassem Soleimani. That does not mean, however, that the U.S. should allow its allies to steep to the same lows and ignore the dire consequences that result from such a counterproductive strategy.

Driving Extremist Ideology

Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism strategy is focused on three pillars: “men, money, and mindset.”²⁴ The first pillar, “men,” is focused on capturing or killing terrorists in order to prevent acts of terrorism. “Money” is focused on preventing the financing of terrorism. The third pillar, “mindset,” is focused on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) from an ideological standpoint. Ironically, with Saudi Arabia's authority and standing in the Islamic world, one might assume that the Kingdom is uniquely positioned to combat an ideology that has exploited Islam and used it to justify violence.

In reality, entrusting Saudi Arabia to prevent the spread of extremist ideology is a classic case of “the arsonist as the firefighter.” Some estimates suggest that during his tenure, King Fahd spent more than \$75 billion “in his efforts to spread Wahhabi Islam,” which included constructing mosques, Islamic centers, Islamic colleges, and madrassas throughout the world.²⁵ For decades, Saudi Arabia has been a primary exporter of radical Wahhabism²⁶, and is now unable to rein in this austere, extremist ideology even if it wanted to. Wahhabi ideology serves as the theological foundation for Salafi-jihadism—the violent ideological creed adhered to by organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda.²⁷ Wahhabism has been identified as the strain of ideology in Islam that practices the most narrow and exclusionary fundamentalist interpretation of the Islamic texts. Muslims disagreeing with the Wahhabi worldview are slandered as apostates (*takfir*), rendering them expendable. In 2013, the European Parliament identified Wahhabism as a driving force behind Salafi-jihadi terrorism.²⁸ ISIS

²³ See, for example: David E. Sanger, “Rebel Arms Flow Is Said to Benefit Jihadists in Syria,” *The New York Times*, October 14, 2012, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15/world/middleeast/jihadists-receiving-most-arms-sent-to-syrian-rebels.html>; Nima Elbagir et al., “US Arms Sold to Saudi Arabia and UAE End up in Wrong Hands,” February 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/02/middleeast/yemen-lost-us-arms/>.

²⁴ “Combating Terrorism: U.S. Agencies Report Progress Countering Terrorism and Its Financing in Saudi Arabia, but Continued Focus on Counter Terrorism Financing Efforts Needed.” United States Government Accountability Office, September 29, 2009, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/300/295879.html>.

²⁵ Karen Elliot House, *On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines—And Future*, New York: Vintage, 2012, p.234.

²⁶ Wahhabism is a fundamentalist Islamic doctrine founded in the 18th Century by an Islamic scholar, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.

²⁷ For more information on the connection between Wahhabism and Salafi-jihadism, see: “Wahhabism and Violent Terrorism: The History, Tenets, and Corollaries of the Desert-Born Religion of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab,” *RISE:2020*, 2017, <https://www.northeastern.edu/rise/presentations/wahhabism-and-violent-terrorism-the-history-tenets-and-corollaries-of-the-desert-born-religion-of-muhammad-ibn-abd-al-wahhab/>; Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad* (Da Capo Press, 2006); Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁸ Claude Miniquet, “The Involvement of Salafism/Wahhabism in the Support and Supply of Arms to Rebel Groups Around the World,” Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union: Directorate B. Belgium: European



is so closely aligned with the ideology dominant in the official Saudi curriculum that the group adopted textbooks from the Ministry of Education in 2015 to instruct children in ISIS-run schools.²⁹ These textbooks are rife with anti-Semitism, religious intolerance, and unequivocal calls to violence.³⁰

Saudi Arabia is one of the chief architects of the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia was only one of a handful of countries (along with the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan) to officially recognize the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan in the late 1990s. The Saudis provided the Taliban with fuel and hundreds of vehicles, as well as financing through "various unofficial channels reinforced by ties of shared ideology in regards to Deobandism and Wahhabism."³¹ As has been well-documented, the Taliban provided a safe-haven and operational space for al-Qaeda to launch the 9/11 attacks against the United States. Importantly, Saudi support for the Taliban continues to the present day, with private and covert funding channels financing the Taliban and other hardline groups, even as Saudi officials publicly deny this support.³²

The Taliban is but one example, and Saudi Arabia's export and funding of Wahhabism has been linked to a rise in local Salafi-jihadist groups in countries like Morocco, Somalia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, among others. In Indonesia, for example, the al-Mukmin Islamic boarding school in Central Java, which is partially funded by Saudi donors, has graduated some of the most notorious jihadis in Indonesia's history, including attackers in the 2002 Bali bombings.³³ In Pakistan, the number of *Madrassas* (religious schools) have exploded since the 1980s from a couple of hundred to an estimated 45,000—in large part owing to substantial funding from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.³⁴ Farah Pandith, who served as the State Department's first ever special representative to Muslim communities, has detailed the prodigious religious funding and soft power exerted by Saudi Arabia in over 100 countries, and its detrimental effects on culture while serving as a driver of extremist ideology globally.³⁵

Parliament, June 2013, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET\(2013\)457137_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET(2013)457137_EN.pdf).

²⁹ See, for example: David D. Kirkpatrick, "ISIS' Harsh Brand of Islam Is Rooted in Austere Saudi Creed," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/isis-abu-bakr-baghdadi-caliph-wahhabi.html>; William McCants, "Trump Should Push the Saudis to Scale Back Proselytizing—They May Be More Responsive than You Think," *Brookings*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/05/10/trump-should-push-the-saudis-to-scale-back-proselytizing-they-may-be-more-responsive-than-you-think/>.

³⁰ "Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom," U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 2017, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017_USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf.

³¹ Justin Y. Reese, "Financing the Taliban," in Michael Freeman, ed., *Financing Terrorism: Case Studies*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012, p.98.

³² Carlotta Gall, "Saudis Bankroll Taliban, Even as King Officially Supports Afghan Government," *New York Times*, December 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/world/asia/saudi-arabia-afghanistan.html?smid=tw-share>.

³³ Jane Perlez, "A NATION CHALLENGED: ASIAN MILITANTS; School in Indonesia Urges 'Personal Jihad' In Steps of Bin Laden," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2002, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/03/world/nation-challenged-asian-militants-school-indonesia-urges-personal-jihad-steps.html>; Timothy Mapes, "Indonesian School Has Chilling Roster Of Terrorist Alumni," *Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2003, sec. News, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB106245231511800900>.

³⁴ Peter W. Singer, "Pakistan's Madrassahs: Ensuring a System of Education Not Jihad," *Brookings*, November 1, 2001, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/pakistans-madrassahs-ensuring-a-system-of-education-not-jihad/>.

³⁵ Farah Pandith, "Extremism Is Riyadh's Top Export," *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/24/farah-pandith-saudi-how-we-win-book/>.



The House of Saud often protests that it, too, remains a target of al-Qaeda and as such, has no connection to jihadists like al-Qaeda and ISIS. However, over the years, charities with “significant Saudi government sponsorship” have diverted funding to al-Qaeda-linked elements.³⁶ As terrorism expert Daniel Byman has noted, the picture in Saudi Arabia is complicated by passive sponsors and “quasi-independent” parts of the government, to include the broader royal family and the clerical establishment, that pursue their own objectives, even if those might be at odds with official government policy.³⁷ Beyond capability, the political will to counter terrorism financing is also questionable. “One criticism that has been voiced repeatedly is that many wealthy financiers with alleged ties to terrorist financiers have close connections to the royal family and are therefore immune from prosecution,” according to Moyara de Moraes Ruehsen.³⁸

A significant portion of international terrorist attacks in the past decades have had some form of logistical, financial, or ideological ties to Saudi Arabia—including attacks targeting the U.S. and U.S. interests abroad. In the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings, both of the would-be suicide bombers attacking the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, were Saudi Nationals; Mohamed Rashed Daoud al-’Owhali (he survived the attack) and Jihad Mohammed Ali.³⁹ The boat used in the 2000 *USS Cole* bombing in Yemen was purchased in Saudi Arabia, and one of the Suicide bombers was a Saudi.⁴⁰ Beyond Saudi nationals’ involvement as hijackers in 9/11, circumstantial evidence suggests that a non-trivial portion of the funding for the terrorist attacks were funneled from donations originating in Saudi Arabia and that during their stay in the United States, the hijackers may have received logistical support from Saudi nationals.⁴¹ More recently, authorities have voiced concerns that the 2019 Sri Lanka Easter attackers were connected to Saudi-funded institutions on the island.⁴²

And while the Saudis themselves trumpet major progress in enacting long overdue reforms to mitigate the funding of extremist groups by Saudi citizens, a government narrowly focused on arresting domestic rivals is an indicator of where MBS is devoting his attention and resources. In

³⁶ Christopher M. Blanchard and Alfred B. Prados, “Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Financing Issues,” Congressional Research Service (CRS), September 14, 2007; see also, Colin P. Clarke, *Terrorism, Inc.: The Financing of Terrorism, Insurgency, and Irregular Warfare*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2015, pp.134-135; and Juan Miguel del Cid Gomez, “A Financial Profile of the Terrorism of Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.4, Iss.4, October 2010, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/113>.

³⁷ Daniel L. Byman, “The Changing Nature of State Sponsorship of Terrorism,” Brookings Institution, Analysis Paper Number 16, May 2008, p.1, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/05_terrorism_byman.pdf.

³⁸ Moyara De Moraes Ruehsen, “Arab Government Responses to the Threat of Terrorist Financing,” in Jeanne K. Giraldo and Harold A. Trinkunas, eds., *Terrorism Financing and State Responses: A Comparative Perspective*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, p.165.

³⁹ “Executive Summary of Bombings of the Embassies of the United States Of America At Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania August 7, 1998,” Department of Justice, November 18, 1998.

⁴⁰ “Yemen President: Boat Used in Cole Attack Bought in Saudi Arabia,” November 24, 2000, <https://www.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/meast/11/24/yemen.cole/index.html>.

⁴¹ See, for example: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States. 2004. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*; “Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities Before and After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2002.” Report of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, December 2002, http://www.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/declass28pages2016.pdf?mod=article_inline.

⁴² “IntelBrief: Sri Lanka Reconsiders the Nature of Its Relationship With Saudi Arabia,” *The Soufan Center*, July 10, 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-sri-lanka-reconsiders-the-nature-of-its-relationship-with-saudi-arabia/>.



2018, MBS declared his intention to attenuate the clout of religious extremists in the Kingdom, but instead, he has primarily targeted moderate Islamic scholars, human rights activists, and any perceived domestic rivals.⁴³ Meanwhile, radical clerics known to be close with MBS, have gone on Saudi state television and declared that Shiites are not Muslims.⁴⁴ The Grand Mufti (the highest religious and legal authority in the country) has issued fatwas calling for the destruction of all churches in the Arabian Peninsula.⁴⁵ Since MBS' rise to power, human rights watchers have noted that execution rates have increased exponentially in Saudi Arabia and, apart from criminals, the government has mostly targeted moderate Islamic scholars, feminist activists, and human rights advocates inaccurately labeled as political dissidents.⁴⁶

Driving Sectarianism

Supporting extremism and radical ideology is often viewed through the lens of sectarian conflict, which is a way for Saudi Arabia to rationalize or frame its policies to its citizens and regional allies. Saudi Arabia is one of the main drivers of sectarian narratives in the region (Iran is the other), with the Kingdom's adversarial relationship with Iran assessed as zero-sum—any Iranian gain is considered a Saudi loss, and vice versa.⁴⁷ Since 1979, the year of both the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been on a collision course. MBS has also adopted the emphasis on sectarianism as a principal part of the conflict with Iran. In 2017, he rejected any attempts at a dialogue with Tehran until Iran stopped spreading Shi'ism around the world. MBS noted that Iran was looking to take over key religious sites in Saudi Arabia and that “We won't wait for the battle to be in Saudi Arabia. Instead, we'll work so that the battle is for them in Iran.”⁴⁸

In order to counter what it sees as growing Iranian, and thus Shia, influence, Riyadh has sponsored armed groups, terrorists, and insurgents, viewing the Kingdom as the vanguard of Sunni Islam. But as Kim Ghattas has observed, when it came to dealing with groups like the Taliban and al-Qaeda,

⁴³ See, for example: Priyanka Boghani, “The Paradox of Saudi Arabia's Social Reforms,” PBS FRONTLINE, October 1, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-paradox-of-saudi-arabias-social-reforms/> and “SAUDI ARABIA,” International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SAUDI-ARABIA-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Ola Salem Alaoudh Abdullah, “Mohammed Bin Salman's Fake Anti-Extremist Campaign,” *Foreign Policy*, June 13, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/13/mohammed-bin-salmans-fake-anti-extremist-campaign/>.

⁴⁵ Tom Heneghan, “Europe Bishops Slam Saudi Fatwa against Gulf Churches,” *Reuters*, March 23, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-christians-fatwa-idUSBRE82M1D720120323>; see also, Elliot Abrams, “‘Destroy All the Churches:’ Saudi Arabia's Poor Treatment of Christians,” *The Atlantic*, March 18, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/destroy-all-the-churches-saudi-arabias-poor-treatment-of-christians/254650/>.

⁴⁶ See, for example: “Death Penalty 2019: Saudi Arabia Executed Record Number of People Last Year amid Decline in Global Executions,” April 21, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/death-penalty-2019-saudi-arabia-executed-record-number-of-people-last-year-amid-decline-in-global-executions/>; “European-Saudi Organisation for Human Rights,” European-Saudi Organisation for Human Rights, September 8, 2020, <https://www.esohr.org/en/>; “The High Cost of Change,” Human Rights Watch, November 4, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/11/04/high-cost-change/repression-under-saudi-crown-prince-tarnishes-reforms>.

⁴⁷ See, for example: Frederic Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

⁴⁸ Al-Arabiya, “In an Interview Today, Mohammed bin Salman to Tackle Saudi, Regional Issues,” May 1, 2017. ; Ben Hubbard, “Dialogue With Iran Is Impossible, Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister Says,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-defense-minister.html>.



the Saudis “were bad managers” and often “lost control over their product—then feigned ignorance or innocence” as these groups went on to wage worldwide terrorist campaigns or participate in civil wars and insurgencies.⁴⁹ In Iraq and Syria, the nature of the conflicts themselves has assumed sectarian undertones, thus fueling recruitment of Salafi-jihadists organizations that continue to destabilize the Middle East.

The Saudis lead the sectarian charge throughout the Middle East, but also domestically. Executing Saudi Shiite cleric and political activist Nimr al-Nimr in early January 2016 fueled sectarianism across the region.⁵⁰ Sectarianism is fundamental to the way the Saudi state now operates, including through its education system. Moreover, Saudi Arabia’s focus on promoting an anti-Shia ideology has influenced some of the most dangerous groups currently active throughout the Middle East, including ISIS. Many of the extremist religious concepts that were promoted by ISIS had their genesis in teachings common in Saudi Arabia, where “a history of Salafi doctrinal ideas...still resonate today.”⁵¹

Driving Geopolitical Conflict

Another casualty of the Saudi Arabia-Iran “cold war” is the increased geopolitical conflicts and proxy wars fought throughout the broader region. Riyadh views countering Tehran-backed proxies with whatever means necessary as a chief strategy to defeat its rival. The most devastating example of which is Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the Yemen civil war—a conflict that the UN has labelled the world’s most severe humanitarian crisis.⁵² MBS’ onslaught against the Yemeni people in order to limit the advance of the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels has seen no limits. The Saudi-coalition, largely using U.S.-manufactured planes and weapons, has elicited widespread international opprobrium for conducting airstrikes that targeted non-military targets, including schools and hospitals.⁵³ Estimates suggest that the coalition is responsible for killing hundreds of civilians in Yemen. On June 15, 2020 yet another report of civilian casualties from a Saudi airstrike—including four children—emerged Yemen.⁵⁴ The imagery for the United States could not be worse: U.S.-made bombs are dropped on civilians, leaving desperate and suffering Yemenis to fend for themselves amidst a country in ruins.

The conflict in Yemen and the subsequent humanitarian crisis has also served to create fertile ground in which Salafi-jihadist organizations can thrive. Prior to the conflict that broke out in 2011, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) membership was estimated in the hundreds. Today, the State Department assesses it is in the thousands.⁵⁵ In 2014, ISIS announced the establishment of an affiliate

⁴⁹ Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry that Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020, p.157.

⁵⁰ Marc Lynch, “Why Saudi Arabia Escalated the Middle East’s Sectarian Conflict,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 4, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/04/why-saudi-arabia-escalated-middle-east-s-sectarian-conflict-pub-62398>

⁵¹ Hassan Hassan, “The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 13, 2016, thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief/

⁵² “Yemen Refugee Crisis: Aid, Statistics and News,” USA for UNHCR. September 8, 2020, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/yemen/>.

⁵³ “War in Yemen,” Global Conflict Tracker, *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 8, 2020, <https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen>.

⁵⁴ Ahmed Al-Haj, “Yemen’s Rebels: Saudi Coalition Airstrike Kills 13 Civilians,” *AP NEWS*, June 15, 2020, <https://apnews.com/17dca7a0cab9057ee838d4a7f0c92fc0>.

⁵⁵ “2019 Country Reports on Terrorism” Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Country-Reports-on-Terrorism-2019-2.pdf>.



in Yemen, ISIS-Y.⁵⁶ Additionally, reports have detailed how Saudi Arabia and the UAE have supplied U.S.-made weapons and armored trucks to militias in Yemen that ultimately ended up in the hands of al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations.⁵⁷ While the Saudi-led coalition wages an endless war with mounting civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis that will last for generations, the jihadis are reaping the benefits.

MBS' miscalculations and failures in Yemen has even caused a rift between Riyadh and one of Saudi Arabia's long-standing allies, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). A UAE-backed faction in Yemen, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), has engaged in on-again, off-again clashes with Saudi-led forces. In late April of this year, the STC declared self-administration in Southern Yemen.⁵⁸ Importantly, Saudi Arabia's strategy and involvement in geopolitical conflicts extends beyond the Middle East to areas in the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. Wherever sustained conflict—especially a conflict with sectarian undertones—rages, it provides jihadists with the opportunity to advance their political goals and expand their organizational footprint.

Case Study: 2019 Pensacola Shooting

On December 6, 2019, Saudi Air Force Second Lieutenant Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani killed three U.S. Navy sailors and injured another eight individuals at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida.⁵⁹ In early February 2020, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed “full responsibility” for the attack.⁶⁰ Alshamrani's repurposing of the words of Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki in a social media posting just prior to the attack point to the enduring influence of al-Qaeda propaganda. In fact, based on Alshamrani's communications with AQAP militants in the lead up to the incident, the Pensacola attack was the first deadly attack on U.S. soil since 9/11 explicitly directed, and not simply inspired by, a foreign terrorist organization.⁶¹

But there is more to this story. The FBI learned earlier this year that Alshamrani had communicated with al-Qaeda for years, and specifically joined the Saudi military to carry out a “special operation.”⁶²

⁵⁶ “ISIS Video Claims ‘We’ve Arrived’ in Yemen,” *Al Arabiya English*, April 26, 2015,

<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/04/26/ISIS-video-claims-we-ve-arrived-in-Yemen>.

⁵⁷ Maggie Michael et al., “AP Investigation: U.S. Allies, al-Qaida Battle Rebels in Yemen,” *Associated Press*, August 6, 2018, <https://apnews.com/f38788a561d74ca78c77cb43612d50da/AP-investigation:-Yemen-war-binds-US,-allies,-al-Qaida>

⁵⁸ “IntelBrief: Instability in Southern Yemen Exposes Rift Between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi,” *The Soufan Center*, May 6, 2020, <http://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-instability-in-southern-yemen-exposes-rift-between-riyadh-and-abu-dhabi/>.

⁵⁹ Colin Clarke, “The Pensacola Terrorist Attack: The Enduring Influence of al-Qa’ida and Its Affiliates,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.13, Iss.13, March 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/pensacola-terrorist-attack-enduring-influence-al-qaida-affiliates/>

⁶⁰ Thomas Joscelyn, “AQAP Claims ‘Full Responsibility’ for Shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola,” *Long War Journal*, February 2, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/02/aqap-claims-full-responsibility-for-shooting-at-naval-air-station-pensacola.php>

⁶¹ “Attorney General William P. Barr and FBI Director Christopher Wray Announce Significant Developments in the Investigation of the Naval Air Station Pensacola Shooting,” Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, May 18, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-william-p-barr-and-fbi-director-christopher-wray-announce-significant>

⁶² Katie Benner and Adam Goldman, “F.B.I. Finds Links Between Pensacola Gunman and Al Qaeda,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/us/politics/justice-department-al-qaeda-florida-naval-base-shooting.html>



And while there were clear lapses in U.S. security cooperation vetting procedures, there were also obvious red flags that were either missed, ignored, or simply dismissed by Saudi authorities.⁶³ After all, in Saudi Arabia, the government monitors all mosques, schools, phone communications, and Internet activity. Yet still, the Saudis seemingly overlooked, or inexplicably failed to detect, Alshamrani's radicalization over the years, and allowed him to travel to the United States as part of a group of Saudi military members selected for specialized training at various locations throughout the United States.⁶⁴ If the Saudis fail to properly vet violent extremists like Alshamrani, and indeed the Saudi government itself dispatches teams of assassins to American soil in an attempt to silence critics of the regime, this calls into question the very nature of the relationship and suggests that Riyadh is unconcerned with the repercussions of its citizens violating U.S. laws, to include homicide and acts of terrorism.

THE WAY FORWARD: HOLDING OUR ALLIES ACCOUNTABLE

The future of the U.S.-Saudi relationship remains an open question. Given Saudi Arabia's connection to the 9/11 attacks, its disastrous war in Yemen, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi⁶⁵ and the relentless harassment of anyone that disagrees with the Kingdom's policies, the majority of Americans now hold a highly unfavorable view of the country. Only 4% of Americans consider Saudi Arabia an "ally."⁶⁶ According to the Pew Research Center, 63% of Americans have no confidence that MBS will "do the right thing regarding world affairs."⁶⁷ This is true even as President Trump continues to prioritize this relationship above many others, making Saudi Arabia the destination for his first trip abroad after becoming President, and regularly boasting of lucrative arms deals between Washington and Saudi Arabia.⁶⁸

Saudi Arabia is an important country for many reasons, and despite numerous challenges, the U.S. government should work toward a strong Saudi-U.S. relationship. The current state of the relationship, however, more resembles a one-way street that allows the Saudi government to act against not only the interests of the United States, but also against the fundamental values of the relationship. The narrative in Washington that has long protected Saudi Arabia from scrutiny has touted economic, energy, and CT benefits to whitewash egregious human rights violations and strategic disasters concocted in Riyadh. It is vital that the United States break free from its tactical successes that amount to strategic failures in the realm of CT, including its cooperation with Saudi Arabia. While CT cooperation with the Kingdom may have yielded operational successes, Saudi

⁶³ MBS was named Saudi Arabia's Minister of Defense in 2015. Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed bin Salman*, New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2020, p.31.

⁶⁴ Michael LaForgia and Eric Schmitt, "The Lapses that Let a Saudi Extremists Shoot Up a U.S. Navy Base," *New York Times*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/us/politics/saudi-gunman-vetting.html>

⁶⁵ Agnes Callamard, "Annex to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions: Investigation into the Unlawful Death of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, June 19, 2019, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session41/Documents/A_HRC_41_CRP.1.pdf

⁶⁶ Kathy Frankovic, "Americans Had Limited Trust in Saudi Arabia Even Before Khashoggi," *YouGov*, October 17, 2018, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2018/10/17/america-had-limited-trust-saudi-arabia-even-disapp>

⁶⁷ "Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman Garners Little Trust From People in the Region and the U.S.," *Pew Research Center*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/29/saudi-arabias-mohammed-bin-salman-garners-little-trust-from-people-in-the-region-and-the-u-s/>

⁶⁸ Victor McFarland, *Oil Powers: A History of the U.S.-Saudi Alliance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020, p.247.



Arabia's actions have arguably contributed to the exponential threat now stemming from Salafi-jihadist terrorism, contributing to long-term and systemic issues that will plague the U.S. for decades.

The key takeaway is that Saudi Arabia will pursue a CT relationship with the U.S. insofar as it also benefits Riyadh, but many of Washington's longstanding and most trusted allies have been marginalized and drivers of extremism are an unfortunate consequence of Saudi Arabia pursuing its geopolitical ambition and settling scores with Iran. Until the U.S. begins to hold Saudi Arabia to the same standards as our other allies, stability in the Middle East and the eradication of extremist ideology, sectarianism, and operating spaces for terrorist organizations remain elusive.