



Civilian and military personnel from Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. conduct counterterrorism drills, search and rescue operations, and respond to a mock vehicle explosion as part of exercise Eagle Resolve, Mar. 28, 2017, in Kuwait. The training exercises participants' ability to respond as a combined joint task force headquarters staff. Exercise Eagle Resolve is the premier U.S. multilateral exercise within the Arabian Peninsula. (U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Timothy Lawn)

Saudi Arabia

Combating Radical Wahhabism?

By Sgt. Maj. Stephen J. Palazzo

Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve

Terrorism (both foreign and domestic) remains a significant threat to the U.S. today. The U.S. lists several foreign countries as official state sponsors of terrorism to include North Korea, Syria, and Iran ("The World Factbook, n.d.). Yet the U.S. fails to add Saudi Arabia to every update of the list, despite 15 of the 19 hijackers from the 9/11 terrorist attacks being Saudi nationals and the operation being financed by Saudi Arabia's most infamous radical figurehead and former leader of Al Qaeda: Osama bin Laden (Lichtblau, 2009).

Saudi Arabia and the U.S. have had a diplomatic relationship since 1933 ("A Chronology," n.d.).

However, its government has done very little when it comes to stopping terrorism and is often accused of turning a blind eye — especially towards international terrorism financing and money laundering (Dudley, 2018). Notably troubling is their apathy towards terrorism linked to a dangerous sect of Islam that originated in the region that formed into the country of Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism.

Aljazeera describes Wahhabism as the official religious doctrine of Saudi Arabia which preaches a strict adherence to Sharia law and a literal interpretation of the Quran (Barmin, 2018). In 2017, *The Telegraph* stated:

“Wahhabism was identified by the European Parliament in Strasbourg as the main source of global terrorism. Wahhabism has become increasingly influential, partly because of Saudi money and partly because of Saudi Arabia's central influence as protector of Mecca. (“What is Wahhabism?” para. 1-2)”

Despite a modern progressive push and close political ties with key western allies, Saudi Arabia continues the exportation and financial support of radical Wahhabism throughout the world. The U.S. needs to demand more of Saudi Arabia in combating this dangerous sect through tough diplomatic and economic pressure in order for them to stop financing and supporting terrorist organizations that continue to attack other countries.

Saudi Arabia History

Islam began in the territories that now make up Saudi Arabia, and two of the holiest sites in the religion reside within its borders: Mecca and Medina (“Saudi Arabia,” n.d.). The country unified in 1932 as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and was led by King Abd Al-Aziz, known as the Lion of Najd. The nickname for the kingdom, House of Saud, originates from the original ruler (Al-Rasheed, 2010). One of his male descendants still rules over the country today (“Saudi Arabia Country Profile,” 2018).



U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, front left, walks with Crown Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, front right, the Saudi minister of defense, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, before a meeting April 23, 2013. Saudi Arabia was Hagel's third stop during a six-day trip to the Middle East to meet with defense counterparts. (DoD photo by Erin A. Kirk-Cuomo)

The Extreme Ideology of Wahhabism Explained

There are two major sects within Islam, Sunni and Shi'a. Wahhabism is a subset of Sunni Islam, and because of its ease of labeling everything that doesn't fit into its followers' agendas as "outside of Islam," is therefore encouraged to be reformed, often by violence, which is why it is often the religion of choice for extremists (“Islamic Radicalism,” 2019). It originated from what is now Saudi Arabia in the late 18th century by a Muslim scholar named Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who also had a rich history of violence. “Wahhab himself was expelled from his home town for his attempts at puritanical reform...After Wahhab's death, his followers became more violent, murdering their way across the land” (“Wahhabism,” 2017).

The devout followers of Wahhabism believe all other forms of Islam are wrong and are quick to label all non-believers and other Islamic practitioners as infidels (Crooke, 2017). According to the *Islamic Supreme Council of America*:

“The premise of this new, narrow ideology was to reject traditional scholars, scholarship and practices under the guise of 'reviving the true tenets of Islam' and protecting the concept of monotheism. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's brand of 'purification' of Islam consisted of prohibiting many traditionally accepted acts of worship, reverence of the person of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him and the pious saints, and burning books containing traditional prayers, interpretations of law and commentaries on the Qur'an and Hadith. Anyone who did not profess to this new ideology is outside the realm of Islam, an apostate, disbeliever or idolater, thus making the shedding of their blood and confiscation of their wealth permitted. In this way, he was able to secure a significant following whose legacy continues in one form or another until today. (“Islamic Radicalism, 2019, para. 5)”

Financial Exportation of Extremism

According to *USA Today*, Saudi Arabia is currently the 12th

wealthiest country in the world ("Which Countries are the Richest?" 2018). But the majority of the country's wealth is concentrated amongst the royal family (Schwartz, 2003). Also troubling, is the fact that Saudi Arabia has increased their military spending within the past 15 years ("The World Factbook, n.d.). According to Niall McCarthy at *Forbes* (2018):

The kingdom has promised to buy more U.S. weaponry than its forces can likely operate. Riyadh is effectively buying influence in the U.S. and as money flows into the coffers of America's biggest defense contractors, it is also attempting to transform itself into the region's undisputed military superpower. (para. 3)

The exportation of radicalized Wahhabism, achieved through the support of Islamic colleges, centers, mosques, and schools for children presents a dangerous problem for the U.S. and other key allies (Byman, 2016). Some of the mosques, even in non-Muslim countries, were financed and supported with funds tied to Saudi Arabia-based charities with ties to terrorist groups like Al Qaeda (Byman, 2016). Estimates from a 2013 European Parliament report show that Saudi Arabia provided upwards of 10 billion dollars to promote Wahhabism throughout the world by donating to charities, like The Muslim World League, with documented ties to terrorist organizations ("The Involvement of Salafism/Wahhabism," 2013).

Terrorist Organizations Linked to Wahhabism

Along with the Muslim World League, the U.S. has named other world charities, such as the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), as also funding terrorist organizations. "Abd, Al Hamid Sulaiman Al-Mujil, a high-ranking IIRO official in Saudi Arabia, has

used his position to bankroll the Al Qaeda network in Southeast Asia" ("Treasury Designates Director," 2006, para. 2).

Currently, over 60 groups are listed as terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department ("Foreign Terrorist Organizations," 2019). According to Adam Weinstein at the *Huffington Post*, "the overwhelming majority are Wahhabi-inspired and Saudi-funded groups, with a focus on the West and Iran as their primary enemy" (2017, para. 1).

To further show the significance of what a highly funded Wahhabi-centered terrorist group can do, the architect of the attacks of September 11, 2001, and former head of Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, was raised in Saudi Arabia and "is a product of this pervasive ideology" (Yamani, 2011, para. 8).

Militant Mosques

Islamic terrorism, particularly from Wahhabism, is cultivated throughout the world in two ways:

- Radical clerics that preach from mosques (Gause, 2004).
- Islamic religious schools (madrassas) that teach students how to wage war on infidels.



Maj. Gen. Terrence J. McKenrick, U.S. Army Central deputy commanding and Gen. Dhafer bin Ali Al-Shehri, Royal Saudi Land Forces northwest area commander, attend the Earnest Leader 17 closing ceremony held in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on Aug. 10, 2017. The purpose of the Earnest Leader 17 exercise was to enhance interoperability and strengthen U.S. and Royal Saudi Land Forces military-to-military relationships. (U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Mark Hanson)

Militant mosque clerics advocate for the use of terrorist attacks to further advance the Wahhabi ideology. From Bosnia to Kosovo, Egypt to Qatar, and even in South East Asia, these mosques teach and advocate radical Wahhabism. The Paris attackers of 2015 attended militant mosques that were predominantly Wahhabi in Belgium and France (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2015). In a dramatic crackdown after

the attacks, the French government shut down three of these mosques based on the grounds of radicalization (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2015).

Madrassas also contribute to the indoctrination of Muslims, especially youths, into the radicalized mindset often recruiting from the lower classes. "Many of the Taliban were educated in Saudi-financed madrassas in Pakistan that teach Wahhabism...around the world, Saudi wealth and charities contributed to

an explosive growth of madrassas" (Nasr, 2001, para. 1).

Africa now lists Wahhabism as the fastest growing religious sect of Islam. Through mosques' teachings, thousands convert to the sect each month (Giorgis, 2013). While this in itself is not extremism, Wahhabism's narrow-minded view and intolerance of others creates an atmosphere where extremism can easily develop (Armstrong, 2014).

Post 9/11 World

Since the attack of 9/11, Saudi Arabia claims to have made strides in combating terrorism, but it is nowhere near the global community's expectations (Graham and Aolain, 2019). Recently, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) — an intergovernmental group that is devoted to investigating money laundering and governmental financial corruption — launched a review of Saudi Arabia's efforts to prevent terrorism financing. The FATF found Saudi Arabia's efforts lacking and included in their report that:

1. "Saudi Arabia is not effectively investigating and prosecuting individuals involved in larger scale or professional money laundering" ("Anti-money Laundering", 2018, para.4).
2. "Saudi Arabia is not effectively confiscating the proceeds of crime" ("Anti-money Laundering," 2018, para. 5).

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Today

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria first gained prominence within large land areas of Iraq and Syria during 2014 (Armstrong, 2014). This is an organization which sought to overthrow governments and establish an Islamic Caliphate whose citizens would follow strict forms of Wahhabism. The interpretation of the religious sect would trace its roots all the way to the original brotherhood of Wahhabism (Armstrong, 2014).

A robust multi-national coalition beat back ISIS, with the Syrian Democratic Forces announcing that ISIS had lost its final stronghold in Syria on March 23, 2019 ("ISIS Fast Facts," 2019). However, even after losing their final piece of territory, ISIS is still operational, and therefore, still a threat.

According to Robin Wright at *The New Yorker*:



Elite special operations forces from Kuwait, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and the U.S. conduct a simulated raid on a defended objective as part of exercise Eagle Resolve, April 02, 2017, Abdali Farms. The raid was a cumulative exercise that tested the participants' tactical skills and abilities to operate cohesively in an operational mission with our Gulf Cooperation Council partner nations. (U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Timothy Lawn)

"The routing of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, in 2001, and the death of Osama bin Laden, a decade later, did not eliminate Al Qaeda. Today, the group has active branches in the Arabian peninsula and North Africa, and it controls a strategic Syrian province on the border with Turkey. In the past two years, ISIS has lost territory the size of Britain inside Syria and Iraq, but it still has eight official branches and more than two dozen networks regularly conducting terrorist and insurgent operations across Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, according to the U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism. (2019, para. 3)"

Argument for an Ally

There are political activists who claim Wahhabism is simply an excuse of Islamic militants to use violence. Under this view, extremism cannot be blamed on Saudi Arabia because they don't overtly promote violence (Alyahya, 2016). Saudi supporters argue that Saudi Arabia effectively fought off operational Al-Qaeda cells within its own country (Alyahya, 2016). And that the Saudi government provides crucial funding for religious missionaries, schools, and mosques throughout India, yet jihadists have not emerged from India (Alyahya, 2016) — although the current investigations into the recent Sri Lankan bombings may soon debunk this argument (Ethirajan, 2019).



The Great Mosque of Mecca, Jan. 20, 2017. (Image courtesy: Maher Najm*)

Another argument towards the pro-Saudi Arabia political stance is the progressiveness the government has shown towards its citizens in the last two years. In June of 2018, for the first time in its history, Saudi Arabia allowed women to drive (the last government to pass this law) (Hubbard, 2017). Beyond just being a basic and deserved right, the government hopes this policy will also boost economic growth since most Saudi women workers spent a large portion of their salary on drivers.

In 2017, in what initially appeared to be a crackdown on corruption, the Saudi government, instructed by the Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, arrested over 200 citizens charged with corruption. Included in the arrests were 11 princes, several famous investors and a prominent military official (Hubbard, 2017). But analysts argue that this was actually a power grab as the prince attempted to consolidate money and power. "Analysts said the arrests were also a pre-emptive measure by the 32-year-old crown prince to remove powerful figures as he seeks to reshape the economy and society" ("Saudi crown prince Mohammed," 2017, para. 12).

Conclusion

The U.S. needs to demand more of Saudi Arabia in combating the dangerous ideological sect of radicalized Wahhabism through continued tough diplomatic and economic pressure. Wahhabism followers are consistently linked to terrorist attacks, militant mosques, and the disruption of world order. Without action, the vicious cycle of chasing terrorism around the world will continue (Shane, 2016).

Like the *FATF* report mentioned earlier, Saudi Arabia needs to do a better job of finding and eradicating money laundering operations out of their country. Without funding to the extremist schools and mosques, in theory, the radicalization of Muslims should slow down.

Also, once funds have been confiscated from laundering operations, they can be used to build rehabilitation centers so that the indoctrination and emotional damage that the militant mosques have done to children can be reversed, much like the United Nations Children's Fund did with the child soldiers of the Sierra Leone Civil War (Barnett, 2012).

While cutting off the funding sources and rehabilitating radicalized children will not destroy Wahhabi extremism entirely, it is a step in the right direction and could be an effective stop gap until a more permanent solution is brought to the table.

An argument against these solutions is that Saudi Arabia has no incentive to crack down on terrorism inside their own walls when Wahhabism is their national religious majority. This is where the U.S. administration should take a hard stance and refuse to sell them weapons since Saudi Arabia is currently the largest purchaser of U.S. weapons in the world (Ivanova, 2018). Doing this would undoubtedly put a strain on the U.S. economy. "In 2017, the U.S. cleared some \$18 billion in new Saudi arms deals" (Ivanova, 2018, para. 3). Obviously, this is not an easy solution, as there is also the issue of the U.S. jobs involved in creating the weapons to be sold, but at what point is the profit from dealing with a country that's not willing to stem the violence and radicalism coming from within its own borders worth more than doing what's

right in combating terrorism?

If the U.S. applies pressure by cutting off their arms deals, it could strike a blow to the Saudi economy. According to Jonathan Caverley at *The New York Times*:

“Transforming the Saudi military to employ Russian, much less Chinese, weapons would cost a fortune even by Gulf standards, would require years of retraining and would greatly reduce its military power for a generation. Russia cannot produce next-generation fighter aircraft, tanks, and infantry fighting vehicles for its own armed forces, much less for the export market. China has not produced, never mind exported, the sophisticated aircraft and missile defense systems Saudi Arabia wants. (2018, para. 11)”

And finally, if Saudi Arabia is unwilling to help stop the spread of terrorism coming from their own country, then the U.S. should officially label Saudi Arabia as a state sponsor of terrorism, the same categorization as Iran.

If the U.S. does this it will affect Saudi Arabia in two major ways:

- There will be a threat on investments as financial institutions and business entities will more carefully scrutinize their dealings and this could result in some potential profit loss.
- There will be public relations damage and a tarnished reputation for a country that is trying to modernize itself with the Prince's Vision 2030 and their attempt to diversify their economy and reduce their dependence on oil (Manzlawiey, 2018).

While potentially painful for both countries, these steps would demonstrate to the world that the U.S. is taking a harder stance against terrorist groups as well as their countries of origin.

In the interest of global security, the U.S. has to take a harder stance against Saudi Arabia and its extreme Wahhabism if the government truly wants to gain momentum in the war on terrorism. ■

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