

Al-Qaeda, Saudi Arabia and Israel

By [Robert Parry](#)

Global Research, February 06, 2015

[Consortium News](#) 4 February 2015

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

The disclosure that convicted al-Qaeda operative Zacarias Moussaoui has identified leading members of the Saudi government as financiers of the terrorist network potentially reshapes how Americans will perceive events in the Middle East and creates a risk for Israel's Likud government which has forged an unlikely alliance with some of these same Saudis.

According to a [story](#) in the New York Times on Wednesday, Moussaoui said in a prison deposition that he was directed in 1998 or 1999 by Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan to create a digital database of the group's donors and that the list included Prince Turki al-Faisal, then Saudi intelligence chief; Prince Bandar bin Sultan, longtime Saudi ambassador to the United States; Prince al-Waleed bin Talal, a prominent billionaire investor; and many leading clerics.

"Sheikh Osama wanted to keep a record who give money," Moussaoui said in imperfect English — "who is to be listened to or who contributed to the jihad."

Although Moussaoui's credibility came under immediate attack from the Saudi kingdom, his assertions mesh with accounts from members of the U.S. Congress who have seen a secret portion of the 9/11 report that addresses alleged Saudi support for al-Qaeda.



Prince Bandar bin Sultan, then Saudi ambassador to the United States, meeting with President George W. Bush in Crawford, Texas. (White House photo)

Further complicating the predicament for Saudi Arabia is that, more recently, Saudi and other Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms have been identified as backers of Sunni militants fighting in Syria to overthrow the largely secular regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The major rebel force benefiting from this support is al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria.

In other words, the Saudis appear to have continued a covert relationship with al-Qaeda-

connected jihadists to the present day.

The Israeli Exposure

And, like the Saudis, the Israelis have sided with the Sunni militants in Syria because the Israelis share the Saudi view that Iran and the so-called “Shiite crescent” – reaching from Tehran and Baghdad to Damascus and Beirut – is the greatest threat to their interests in the Middle East.

That shared concern has pushed Israel and Saudi Arabia into a de facto alliance, though the collaboration between Jerusalem and Riyadh has been mostly kept out of the public eye. Still, it has occasionally peeked out from under the covers as the two governments deploy their complementary assets – Saudi oil and money and Israeli political and media clout – in areas where they have mutual interests.

In recent years, these historic enemies have cooperated in their joint disdain for the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt (which was overthrown in 2013), in seeking the ouster of the Assad regime in Syria, and in pressing for a more hostile U.S. posture toward Iran.

Israel and Saudi Arabia also have collaborated in efforts to put the squeeze on Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, who is deemed a key supporter of both Iran and Syria. The Saudis have used their power over oil production to drive down prices and hurt Russia’s economy, while U.S. neoconservatives – who share Israel’s geopolitical world view – were at the forefront of the coup that ousted Ukraine’s pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014.

The behind-the-scenes Israeli-Saudi alliance has put the two governments – uncomfortably at times – on the side of Sunni jihadists battling Shiite influence in Syria, Lebanon and even Iraq. On Jan. 18, 2015, for instance, Israel attacked Lebanese-Iranian advisers assisting Assad’s government in Syria, killing several members of Hezbollah and an Iranian general. These military advisors were engaged in operations against al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front.

Meanwhile, Israel has refrained from attacking Nusra Front militants who have seized Syrian territory near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. One source familiar with U.S. intelligence information on Syria told me that Israel has a “non-aggression pact” with these Nusra forces.

An Odd Alliance

Israel’s odd-couple alliances with Sunni interests have evolved over the past several years, as Israel and Saudi Arabia emerged as strange bedfellows in the geopolitical struggle against Shiite-ruled Iran and its allies in Iraq, Syria and southern Lebanon. In Syria, for instance, senior Israelis have made clear they would prefer Sunni extremists to prevail in the civil war rather than Assad, who is an Alawite, a branch of Shiite Islam.

In September 2013, Israel’s Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, then a close adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told the Jerusalem Post that Israel favored the Sunni extremists over Assad.

“The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc,” Oren told the Jerusalem Post in [an interview](#). “We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred

the bad guys who weren't backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran." He said this was the case even if the "bad guys" were affiliated with al-Qaeda.

And, in June 2014, speaking as a former ambassador at an Aspen Institute conference, Oren expanded on his position, [saying](#) Israel would even prefer a victory by the brutal Islamic State over continuation of the Iranian-backed Assad in Syria. "From Israel's perspective, if there's got to be an evil that's got to prevail, let the Sunni evil prevail," Oren said.

Skepticism and Doubt

In August 2013, when I first reported on the growing relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia in an article entitled "[The Saudi-Israeli Superpower](#)," the story was met with much skepticism. But, increasingly, this secret alliance has gone public.

On Oct. 1, 2013, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu hinted at it in his United Nations General Assembly speech, which was largely devoted to excoriating Iran over its nuclear program and threatening a unilateral Israeli military strike.

Amid the bellicosity, Netanyahu dropped in a largely missed clue about the evolving power relationships in the Middle East, saying:

"The dangers of a nuclear-armed Iran and the emergence of other threats in our region have led many of our Arab neighbors to recognize, finally recognize, that Israel is not their enemy. And this affords us the opportunity to overcome the historic animosities and build new relationships, new friendships, new hopes."

The next day, Israel's Channel 2 TV news [reported](#) that senior Israeli security officials had met with a high-level Gulf state counterpart in Jerusalem, believed to be Prince Bandar, the former Saudi ambassador to the United States who was then head of Saudi intelligence.

The reality of this unlikely alliance has now even reached the mainstream U.S. media. For instance, Time magazine correspondent Joe Klein [described](#) the new coziness in an article in the Jan. 19, 2015 issue.

He wrote:

"On May 26, 2014, an unprecedented public conversation took place in Brussels. Two former high-ranking spymasters of Israel and Saudi Arabia - Amos Yadlin and Prince Turki al-Faisal - sat together for more than an hour, talking regional politics in a conversation moderated by the Washington Post's David Ignatius.

"They disagreed on some things, like the exact nature of an Israel-Palestine peace settlement, and agreed on others: the severity of the Iranian nuclear threat, the need to support the new military government in Egypt, the demand for concerted international action in Syria. The most striking statement came from Prince Turki. He said the Arabs had 'crossed the Rubicon' and 'don't want to fight Israel anymore.'"

Though Klein detected only the bright side of this détente, there was a dark side as well, as

referenced in Moussaoui's deposition, which identified Prince Turki as one of al-Qaeda's backers. Perhaps even more unsettling was his listing of Prince Bandar, who had long presented himself as a U.S. friend, so close to the Bush Family that he was nicknamed "Bandar Bush."

Moussaoui claimed that he discussed a plan to shoot down Air Force One with a Stinger missile with a staff member at the Saudi Embassy in Washington, at a time when Bandar was the ambassador to the United States.

According to the New York Times article by Scott Shane, Moussaoui said he was assigned to "find a location where it may be suitable to launch a Stinger attack and then, after, be able to escape," but that he was arrested on Aug. 16, 2001, before he could carry out the reconnaissance mission.

The thought of anyone in the Saudi embassy, then under the control of "Bandar Bush," scheming with al-Qaeda to shoot down George W. Bush's Air Force One is shocking, if true. The notion would have been considered unthinkable even after the 9/11 attacks, which involved 15 Saudis among the 19 hijackers.

After those terror attacks which killed nearly 3,000 Americans, Bandar went to the White House and persuaded Bush to arrange for the rapid extraction of bin Laden's family members and other Saudis in the United States. Bush agreed to help get those Saudi nationals out on the first flights allowed back into the air.

Bandar's intervention undercut the FBI's chance to learn more about the ties between Osama bin Laden and the 9/11 perpetrators by giving FBI agents only time for cursory interviews with the departing Saudis.

Bandar himself was close to the bin Laden family and acknowledged having met Osama bin Laden in the context of bin Laden thanking Bandar for his help financing the jihad project in Afghanistan during the 1980s. "I was not impressed, to be honest with you," Bandar [told](#) CNN's Larry King about bin Laden. "I thought he was simple and very quiet guy."

The Saudi government claimed to have broken ties with bin Laden in the early 1990s when he began targeting the United States because President George H.W. Bush had stationed U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, but – if Moussaoui is telling the truth – al-Qaeda would have still counted Bandar among its supporters in the late 1990s.

Bandar and Putin

Bandar's possible links to Sunni terrorism also emerged in 2013 during a confrontation between Bandar and Putin over what Putin viewed as Bandar's crude threat to unleash Chechen terrorists against the Sochi Winter Olympics if Putin did not reduce his support for the Syrian government.

According to a leaked [diplomatic account](#) of a July 31, 2013 meeting in Moscow, Bandar informed Putin that Saudi Arabia had strong influence over Chechen extremists who had carried out numerous terrorist attacks against Russian targets and who had since deployed to join the fight against the Assad regime in Syria.

As Bandar called for a Russian shift toward the Saudi position on Syria, he reportedly offered guarantees of protection from Chechen terror attacks on the Olympics. "I can give you a

guarantee to protect the Winter Olympics in the city of Sochi on the Black Sea next year,” Bandar reportedly said. “The Chechen groups that threaten the security of the games are controlled by us.”

Putin responded, “We know that you have supported the Chechen terrorist groups for a decade. And that support, which you have frankly talked about just now, is completely incompatible with the common objectives of fighting global terrorism.”

Bandar’s Mafia-like threat toward the Sochi games – a version of “nice Olympics you got here, it’d be a shame if something terrible happened to it” – failed to intimidate Putin, who continued to support Assad.

Less than a month later, an incident in Syria almost forced President Barack Obama’s hand in launching U.S. air strikes against Assad’s military, which would have possibly opened the path for the Nusra Front or the Islamic State to capture Damascus and take control of Syria. On Aug. 21, 2013, a mysterious sarin attack outside Damascus killed hundreds and, in the U.S. media, the incident was immediately blamed on the Assad regime.

American neocons and their allied “liberal interventionists” demanded that Obama launch retaliatory air strikes even though some U.S. intelligence analysts doubted that Assad’s forces were responsible and suspected that the attack was carried out by extremist rebels trying to pull the U.S. military into the civil war on their side.

Yet, pushed by the neocons and liberal war hawks, Obama nearly ordered a bombing campaign designed to “degrade” the Syrian military but called it off at the last minute. He then accepted Putin’s help in reaching a diplomatic solution in which Assad agreed to surrender his entire chemical weapons arsenal, while still denying any role in the sarin attack.

Later, the Assad-did-it case crumbled amid new evidence that Sunni extremists, supported by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, were the more likely perpetrators of the attack, a scenario that became increasingly persuasive as Americans learned more about the cruelty and ruthlessness of many Sunni jihadists fighting in Syria. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[The Mistaken Guns of Last August.](#)”]

Targeting Putin

Putin’s cooperation with Obama to head off a U.S. military strike in Syria made the Russian president more of a target for the American neocons who thought they finally had reached the cusp of their long-desired “regime change” in Syria only to be blocked by Putin. By late September 2013, a leading neocon, National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman, announced the goal of challenging Putin and recognizing his sore point in Ukraine.

Taking to the Washington Post’s op-ed page on Sept. 26, 2013, Gershman [called](#) Ukraine “the biggest prize” and an important step toward ultimately ousting Putin. Gershman wrote,

“Ukraine’s choice to join Europe will accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian imperialism that Putin represents. ... Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Neocons’ Ukraine-Syria-Iran Gambit.](#)”]

However, in early 2014, Putin was obsessed with Bandar's implicit threat of terrorism striking the Sochi Olympics, thus distracting him from the "regime change" - being pushed by NED and neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland - next door in Ukraine.

On Feb. 22, 2014, putschists, spearheaded by well-organized neo-Nazi militias, drove elected President Viktor Yanukovich and his government from power. Putin was caught off-guard and, in the resulting political chaos, agreed to requests from Crimean officials and voters to accept Crimea back into Russia, thus exploding his cooperative relationship with Obama.

With Putin the new pariah in Official Washington, the neocon hand also was strengthened in the Middle East where renewed pressure could be put on the "Shiite crescent" in Syria and Iran. However, in summer 2014, the Islamic State, which had splintered off from al-Qaeda and its Nusra Front, went on a rampage, invading Iraq where captured soldiers were beheaded. The Islamic State then engaged in gruesome videotaped decapitations of Western hostages inside Syria.

The Islamic State's brutality and the threat it posed to the U.S.-backed, Shiite-dominated government of Iraq changed the political calculus. Obama felt compelled to launch airstrikes against Islamic State targets in both Iraq and Syria. American neocons tried to convince Obama to expand the Syrian strikes to hit Assad's forces, too, but Obama realized such a plan would only benefit the Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Nusra Front.

In effect, the neocons were showing their hand - much as Israeli Ambassador Oren had done - favoring the Sunni extremists allied with al-Qaeda over Assad's secular regime because it was allied with Iran. Now, with Moussaoui's deposition identifying senior Saudi officials as patrons of al-Qaeda, another veil seems to have dropped.

Complicating matters further, Moussaoui also claimed that he passed letters between Osama bin Laden and then Crown Prince Salman, who recently became king upon the death of his brother King Abdullah.

But Moussaoui's disclosure perhaps cast the most unflattering light on Bandar, the erstwhile confidant of the Bush Family who - if Moussaoui is right - may have been playing a sinister double game.

Also facing potentially embarrassing questions is Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, especially if he goes through with his planned speech before a joint session of Congress next month, attacking Obama for being soft on Iran.

And, America's neocons might have some explaining to do about why they have carried water not just for the Israelis but for Israel's de facto allies in Saudi Arabia.

*Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).*

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