

Trump Lets Saudis Off His ‘Muslim Ban’. Who are the “Real Sponsors of Terrorism”?

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President Trump’s ban against letting people from seven mostly Muslim countries enter the United States looks to many like a thinly concealed bias against a religion.

*But it also is a troubling sign that Trump doesn’t have the nerve to challenge **the false terrorism narrative** demanded by Israel and Saudi Arabia.*



King Salman of Saudi Arabia and his entourage arrive to greet President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama at King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 27, 2015. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

The Israeli-Saudi narrative, which is repeated endlessly inside Official Washington, is that Iran is the principal sponsor of terrorism when that dubious honor clearly falls to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni-led Muslim states, including Pakistan, nations that did not make Trump’s list.

The evidence of who is funding and supporting most of the world’s terrorism is overwhelming. All major terrorist groups that have bedeviled the United States and the West over the past couple of decades – from Al Qaeda to the Taliban to Islamic State – can trace their roots back to Sunni-led countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Qatar.

Privately, this reality has been recognized by senior U.S. officials, including former Vice President Joe Biden, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Trump’s National Security Advisor Michael Flynn. But that knowledge has failed to change U.S. policy, which caters to the oil-rich Saudis and the politically powerful Israelis.

For instance, in August 2012, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency – then headed by General Flynn – [warned](#) that Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al Qaeda were “the major forces driving the insurgency” against the largely secular government in Syria.

Flynn’s DIA advised President Obama that rebels were trying to establish a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria,” and that “western countries, the gulf states, and Turkey are supporting these efforts” to counter the supposed Shiite threat to the region.

Hillary Clinton also was aware of this reality, as the threat from the head-chopping Islamic State – also known as ISIL or ISIS – grew worse in summer 2014. In September 2014, the former Secretary of State [wrote](#) in an email that Saudi Arabia and Qatar were “providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups.”

Later in 2014, Vice President Joe Biden made the same point in a talk at Harvard’s Kennedy School: “Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria ... the Saudis, the emirates, etc. what were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad, except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.” [[Quote](#) starts at 53:25.]

Known But Unknown

So the truth was known at senior levels of the Obama administration – and now via National Security Advisor Flynn at the top of the Trump administration – but the Israelis and the Saudis don’t want that reality to shape U.S. foreign policy. In other words, this truth about the real source of terrorism was known but unknown.



Retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General Michael Flynn at a campaign rally for Donald Trump at the Phoenix Convention Center in Phoenix, Arizona. Oct. 29, 2016. (Flickr Gage Skidmore)

Instead, Israel demands that Washington share its hatred of the Lebanese militant group, Hezbollah, a Shiite force that organized in the 1980s to drive the invading Israeli army out of southern Lebanon. Because Hezbollah dealt a rare defeat to the Israeli Defense Force, Israel puts it at the top of “terrorist” organizations. And, Hezbollah is supported by Iran.

Saudi Arabia, too, hates Iran because the Sunni-fundamentalist Saudi monarchy considers Shia Islam heretical, a sectarian conflict that dates back to the Seventh Century. So, the Saudi government has viewed Sunni jihadists as the tip of the spear against these Shiite rivals.

Israeli and Saudi officials have even made clear that they would prefer Al Qaeda or Islamic State to prevail in the Syrian war rather than have the largely secular government of President Bashar al-Assad survive because they see his regime as part of a “Shiite crescent” reaching from Tehran through Damascus to the Hezbollah neighborhoods of Beirut.

In September 2013, Israel’s Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, 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 said in [the 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.

The West’s Worries

However, when Americans and Europeans worry about terrorism, they are talking about Al Qaeda and Islamic State, terror groups led by Sunni extremists. Those are the groups that have been responsible for bloody attacks on the United States and Western Europe.



Prince Bandar bin Sultan, then Saudi ambassador to the United States, meeting with President George W. Bush in Crawford, Texas, on Aug. 27, 2002. (White House photo)

The absurdity of Trump’s immigration ban is underscored by the fact that it would not have kept out the 15 Saudi hijackers dispatched by Al Qaeda to carry out the 9/11 attacks. They came from the home country of Al Qaeda’s Saudi founder Osama bin Laden.

Neither would Trump's ban have stopped Muhamed Atta, one of the 9/11 ringleaders who was from Egypt, another country ignored by Trump, which also happens to be the original home of Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's current leader.

So, what Trump's initial foray into the complex issue of terrorism has revealed is that he is unwilling to take on the real nexus of terrorism, just as Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama shied away from a clash with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikdoms.

In the first week of Donald Trump's presidency, the regional interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia have continued to dictate how Official Washington addresses terrorism.

Trump's seven-nation list includes Iran, Syria and Sudan as state sponsors of terrorism and Iraq, Yemen, Somalia and Libya as countries where there has been terrorist activity. But the governments of Iran and Syria arguably have become two of the leading fighters against the terrorist groups of most concern to the U.S. and European populations.

Iran is aiding both Syria and Iraq in their conflicts with Al Qaeda and Islamic State. Inside Syria, the Syrian army has borne the brunt of that fighting against terror groups funded and armed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and - yes - at least indirectly, the United States. Yet while none of the Al Qaeda/Islamic State benefactors made Trump's list, Iran and Syria did.

In other words, not only is Trump's ban a blunderbuss blast at thousands of innocent Muslims who have no intention of hurting the United States but it doesn't even take aim at the most dangerous targets which represent a genuine terrorist threat.

Trump's ban is really a twisted case of "political correctness" purporting to reject "political correctness." While Trump claims to recognize that it is dangerously naïve to let in Muslims when Islamic terrorism has remained a threat to Americans, Trump has left off his list the most likely sources of terrorists because - to do otherwise - would have negative political consequences in Official Washington.

By going after Iran and Syria, in particular, Trump appears to be currying favor with neoconservatives and liberal hawks in Congress and across Official Washington. Perhaps, he is simply hesitating while the Senate considers confirmation of his choice for Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson. The Senate also could reject other of his foreign policy nominees.

But that is exactly the kind of compromising that undermined any attempts by President Obama to engineer a real change from the "war of terror" strategy of George W. Bush. Obama was so afraid of going against the Israelis and the Saudis that he only altered U.S. policy on the margins and let himself get dragged into Israeli-Saudi-favored "regime change" adventures in Syria and Yemen.

Dashed or Delayed Hopes

When Trump initially rebuffed the neocons and liberal hawks who dominate Official Washington's foreign establishment, there was hope that he might at least try to hold Saudi Arabia accountable as the chief sponsor of terrorism, rather than to continue the Israeli-Saudi-imposed narrative.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at

the United Nations in 2012, drawing his own “red line” on how far he will let Iran go in refining nuclear fuel.

But to do so carried political risks beyond offending the politically potent Israelis who have forged a quiet alliance with the wealthy Saudis. Trump would also have to recognize the important role of Republican icon Ronald Reagan in creating the terrorist threat.

After all, the origins of the modern jihadist movement trace back to the \$1 billion-a-year collaboration between the Reagan administration and the Saudi monarchy to support the Afghan mujahedeen in their war against a secular government in Kabul backed by the Soviet Union.

The extravagant arming of these Afghan fundamentalists, who were bolstered by international jihadists led by Osama bin Laden, dealt a harsh blow to the Soviet forces and ultimately led to the collapse of the secular regime in Kabul, but the victory also paved the way for the rise of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, blowback that hit the United States on 9/11.

The U.S. reaction to that shock never directly addressed how the problem had originated and who the underlying culprits were. Though George W. Bush’s administration did begin by invading Afghanistan, the neoconservatives around him quickly turned the U.S. retaliation against longstanding Israeli targets, such as Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Syria’s Assad dynasty though they had nothing to do with 9/11.

The fiction that these largely secular governments were responsible for Islamic terrorism — and the mislabeling of Shia-ruled Iran as the chief sponsor of such terrorism — have remained the myths confusing the American people and thus justifying continued U.S. support for the Israeli-Saudi war against the “Shiite crescent.”

Trump, who is heavily criticized for his inability to distinguish fact from fantasy, could have displayed a brave commitment to truth-telling if he had fashioned his counter-terrorism policy to actually address the real sponsors of terrorism. Instead, he chose to continue the lies that the Israelis and Saudis insist that Official Washington tell.

In doing so, Trump is not only offending much of the world and alienating countries that are at the forefront of the fight against the worst terrorist threats, but he is continuing to shield the key regimes that have perpetuated the scourge of terrorism.

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