

The Saudi Sphere: Salafi 'smart power' targets beyond Lebanon to Iran

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“In the greater sphere of global relations, Saudi Arabia faces a critical and uncertain future with the limitations of an oil economy, the US disengaging from Iraq, and the controversy over a nuclear Iran.”

— Giulio Gallarotti and Isam Yahia Al Filali¹

The Saudis, who for years have submitted themselves in “soft bilateralism” to the US-led world order and in the past have shown a willingness to acquiesce to US foreign policy goals,² now appear to be breaking away from the west³ and expanding their sphere of influence from Syria to Lebanon and beyond using “smart” power. But appearances can be deceiving; the US, while arguably in decline,⁴ still holds sway over its Saudi “partner” and Iran remains the target.

Certainly, an aura of Saudi independence surrounds the recent \$3 billion grant to Lebanon for purchasing French weaponry, which is “to confront the Israeli threat,” according to Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, who also hinted that another \$1.6 billion may be forthcoming.⁵ However, the lack of an outcry in the Zionist press over the Saudi arms grant combined with the recent series of bombings in Beirut targeting Hezbollah,⁶ former minister Mohamad B. Chatah,⁷ and the double blast at the Iranian Embassy executed by Al-Qa’ida affiliate Abdullah Azzam Brigades,⁸ point to collusion between Riyadh and Tel Aviv with the approval of Washington.

A brief look at some international relations theory may help us to understand these events. Soft power is a term coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 to refer to the use of resources other than military force that countries can use in the international arena to achieve foreign policy objectives by cultivating cooperation from other state actors.⁹ Hard power, on the other hand, extracts submission to foreign policy goals by threats and use of military force. Smart power¹⁰ is a combination of hard and soft power as deemed optimal by the state actor for the desired results, and this is exactly what Saudi Arabia is doing to extend its regional sphere of influence.

Since the past century and more so recently, Saudi foreign policy has sought such a balance between hard and soft power which, according to Giulio Gallarotti of Wesleyan University and Isam Yahia Al Filali of King Abdulaziz University, represents “ultimately a quest for cosmopolitan or smart power.”¹¹ However, this Saudi historical quest for soft power has at times turned out not to be so smart. While it can be argued that Saudi policies in support of oppressed Muslims in Bosnia, Palestine and Chechnya contributed to the projection of soft power, terrorist groups such as Al-Qa’ida, which developed as a result of the export of the kingdom’s Wahhabi religious ideology, have threatened to undercut the legitimacy of the Saudi rulers.¹²

The current system of international relations imposed by the US and its western allies is based on the realist theory, whose acolytes define the eschewed state of anarchy “as no common power above actors to keep them in awe.”¹³ Hence, sole superpower the United States, casts itself in the role of “common power” to supply the needed “shock and awe” to prevent anarchy and preserve international order, forcing other state actors to either align with the US or be ostracized as “rogue states.” While the Saudis in the past have willingly accepted this US-led order, they now

have expressed intentions of setting a foreign policy direction independent of western desires.¹⁴ Nevertheless, its top foreign policy goal, which is defeating Syrian President Assad along with his Iranian and Hezbollah allies, coincides with the wishes of the US and the Zionist entity.¹⁵

Clearly, this international pecking order gives relatively little credence to the human rights practices of states yielding to US demands, especially in the energy-rich Middle East. As former US National Security Council officials Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett wrote, “Washington has never demonstrated that it cares about human rights in the Middle East for their own sake. It cares about them when and where caring appears to serve other policy goals,” otherwise, “Washington is ... indifferent to human rights.” The Leveretts cite Bahrain as an example of US human rights indifference,¹⁶ yet we need look no further than Saudi Arabia to find a quintessential example of a US ally whose authorities “suppress or fail to protect the rights of 9 million Saudi women and girls and 9 million foreign workers,”¹⁷ according to Human Rights Watch, while Washington continues to look the other way.

One of the most potent soft power resources in the Saudi smart power cache is its central position as the birthplace of Islam along with its image as the religion’s most zealous practitioner. Using its abundant oil revenues, Saudi Arabia has managed to create for itself an illusion of a prosperous yet religiously pious monarchy that follows a strict, purified form of Islam known as Salafism (from the Arabic *salaf* - ancestor) or Wahhabism (from *Mohammad Abdul Wahhab* - the founder of the sect). By exporting this parochial Salafi or Takfiri (from the Arabic *takfir* - to declare someone a heretic) doctrine throughout the Middle East and even to the Americas as the “authentic Islam,” the Saudi regime not only has elevated its stature in much of Arab world, but also has bolstered its tottering monarchy on the domestic front.¹⁸

Based on this virulently anti-Shi’a Wahhabi ideological distortion of Islam, the Saudi government officially discriminates against Shi’a Muslims, has killed numerous Shi’a protestors, and has even stood idly by as Takfiri clerics have issued fatwas justifying the murdering of Shi’as as heretics.¹⁹ By using the warped Salafi ideology as soft power, the Saudis have managed to export anti-Shi’a hatred to Pakistan, where a genocide is taking place that has killed nearly 12,000 of the country’s estimated 40 million Hazara Shi’as.²⁰ The Saudis also funded, with help from the US and other Arab states, Iraq’s imposed 8-year war on Iran, during which over 200,000 Iranians were killed, almost 400,000 wounded and over 100,000 were gassed.²¹

The other crucial weapon in the Saudi soft power arsenal is, of course, the kingdom’s enormous oil wealth, which has been used to buy influence in Egypt and most recently in Lebanon. With this wealth, Saudi Arabia has established satellite TV and YouTube networks that broadcast anti-Shi’a propaganda, and recruit and organize a pool of Takfiri extremists, which threatens to plunge the entire Islamic Ummah into a bloody confrontation along Shi’a and Sunni sectarian lines. “Satellite television, internet, YouTube and Twitter content, frequently emanating from or financed by oil states in the Arabian peninsula, are at the centre of a campaign to spread sectarian hatred to every corner of the Muslim world,” warned journalist and author Patrick Cockburn.²²

The vehement anti-Shi’a operations are ultimately directed, of course, against Saudi Arabia’s perceived arch nemesis, Iran, and all smart power deployments, including the recent grant to Lebanon, have the ultimate objective of weakening the Islamic Republic. For example, contrary

to the statement of Lebanon's president, the purpose of the Saudi grant was NOT to help the country counter threats by the Zionist entity. Hezbollah, which has previously demonstrated its superior military capabilities, is fully capable of guarding Lebanon against Israeli aggression. Rather, the aim here is to build the power of western-aligned blocs, in hopes of enabling them to counter the Lebanese Resistance movement. And to achieve their nefarious goals of containing Iran, the Saudis are reportedly even collaborating with the Israeli entity.²³

Saudi Arabia's intelligence head, Prince Bandar bin-Sultan bin Abdulaziz even went so far as to threaten Russian President Putin obliquely during a meeting on July 31, 2013.²⁴ After asking Putin to change his position in support of President Assad in Syria, Bandar reportedly said, "I can give you a guarantee to protect the Winter Olympics in the city of Sochi on the Black Sea next year. The Chechen groups that threaten the security of the games are controlled by us."²⁵ President Putin, of course, was not swayed by Bandar's bellicose rhetoric, and pointed out such a veiled threat "is completely incompatible with the common objectives of fighting global terrorism that you [Bandar] mentioned."²⁶

Regrettably, since that meeting between Bandar and Putin, Al-Qa'ida-linked terrorists have struck three times in Volgograd, Russia, bombing a bus on October 21, 2013,²⁷ a train station on December 29 and a bus on the next day,²⁸ killing a total of at least 37 persons, and thus making good on Bandar's threat.²⁹ In the Russian newspaper *Izvestiya*, Kirill Benediktov wrote, "There is no doubt that the Salafist regimes of the Persian Gulf, primarily Saudi Arabia, have been supporting Islamic terrorism in Russia."³⁰ And this is with the likely collaboration of the CIA, with which Saudi Prince Bandar has historical connections.³¹

With the tacit blessing of the US and its Zionist ally, the malevolent Saudi regime continues to export its hate-filled, conflict-provoking, intolerant religious ideology to Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Malaysia and elsewhere. The Islamic Ummah, with the help of other peace-loving nations, must confront Saudi Arabia and force it to stop exporting this violent anti-Shi'a enmity, which has been responsible for the loss of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives.

Endnotes

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- ¹¹ Giulio Gallarotti and Isam Yahia Al Filali, *ibid.*, 8.
- ¹² Lawrence Rubin, "A Typology of Soft Powers in Middle East Politics," *The Dubai Initiative*, Working Paper No. 5, December 2010, 11, accessed January 3, 2014, http://www.dsg.ae/portals/3/DI_WP05_Final.pdf.
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