

**Response of 9/11 Family Members
and Survivors United for Justice
Against Terrorism to the Kingdom
of Saudi Arabia's "Analysis" of
the 28 Classified Pages of the 9/11
Congressional Joint Inquiry Report**

The Saudi rebuttal of the findings of the classified 28 pages of the Congressional Joint Inquiry Report on the 9/11 attacks, which the Kingdom and its public relations agents have not seen, is an exercise in misdirection and obfuscation. It mischaracterizes the work and findings of the separate 9/11 Commission, ignores public statements and sworn testimony of 9/11 Commission Members and staff directly refuting the Saudi position, and conspicuously evades the substantial and credible evidence implicating elements and employees of the Saudi government in both the rise of al Qaeda and the events of September 11, 2001.

■ **THE SPECIFIC “FINDING” OF THE 9/11 COMMISSION INVOKED BY SAUDI ARABIA DOES NOT EXONERATE THE SAUDIS.**

In their public relations efforts, the Saudis principally have pointed to a single sentence in the 9/11 Commission Report in seeking to downplay the 28 pages and claiming that the 9/11 Commission exonerated the Kingdom. The sentence in question reads “Saudi Arabia has long been considered the primary source of al Qaeda funding, but we have found no evidence that the Saudi government *as an institution* or *senior Saudi officials* individually funded the organization.”

“Today, some commission staff members point out that the wording [of the sentence in question] did not rule out the possibility that lower-ranking Saudi officials had assisted the hijackers. They also said the commission operated under extreme time pressure and was not able to follow up fully on every lead.” A Saudi Imam, 2 Hijackers and Lingerin 9/11 Mystery, Mark Mazzetti and Scott Shane, New York Times, June 17, 2016.

Far from exonerating the Kingdom and its government employees, the sentence plainly leaves open the potential that the 9/11 Commission did find evidence that *elements* of the Saudi government and *non-senior* Saudi officials had provided support to al Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks. Further, the carefully worded and limited statement the Kingdom erroneously relies upon for exoneration was further qualified by the Commission in the sentence that immediately follows, in which the Commission confirmed the “**likelihood** that *charities with significant Saudi government sponsorship diverted funds to al Qaeda.*”

■ **9/11 COMMISSION MEMBERS AND STAFF INVESTIGATORS HAVE CONFIRMED THIS PRECISE MEANING OF THE SENTENCE IN QUESTION, AND EXPRESSLY REJECTED THE CLAIM THAT THE 9/11 COMMISSION EXONERATED SAUDI ARABIA FOR THE EVENTS OF 9/11.**

9/11 Commissioner John Lehman *in a sworn Affidavit* filed in the 9/11 lawsuit: “Contrary to the view advocated by the Kingdom, the 9/11 Commission did not exonerate Saudi Arabia of culpability for the events of September 11, 2001, or the financing of al Qaeda in the years leading up to the September 11th attacks. In addition, the Kingdom is fundamentally incorrect in suggesting that our Commission in some way ‘considered and rejected as factually untrue’ the allegations or claims that have been advanced by the 9/11 plaintiffs against Saudi Arabia.”

9/11 Commissioner Bob Kerrey *in a sworn Affidavit* filed in the 9/11 lawsuit: “[I]t is fundamentally inaccurate and misleading for the Kingdom and [the Saudi High Commission] to suggest that the 9/11 Commission’s investigation exonerated them for the events of September 11, 2001, or that the 9/11 Commission’s investigation directly rebutted Plaintiffs’ claims.”

"To the extent the Kingdom and [one of its government charities] offer those statements [from the 9/11 Commission Report] in support of the proposition that the 9/11 Commission fully exonerated Saudi Arabia and any Saudi government charities for any potential culpability for the financing and emergence of al Qaeda or the events of September 11, 2001, following a comprehensive evaluation of all potentially relevant evidence, the Kingdom and [its government charity] are incorrect. To the contrary, significant questions remain unanswered concerning the possible involvement of Saudi government institutions and actors in the financing and sponsorship of al Qaeda, and *evidence relating to the plausible involvement of possible Saudi government agents in the September 11th attacks has never been fully pursued.*"

9/11 Commissioner and former Congressman and Ambassador Tim Roemer in an opinion column published in RealClear Politics: "The Commission did not exonerate the Saudis."

An unnamed 9/11 Commissioner quoted in the Guardian: "I know some members of the [Commission] staff felt we went much too easy on the Saudis. I didn't really know the extent of it until after the report came out."

9/11 Commission Co-Chair Lee Hamilton as quoted by CNN: "The sentence was written in his words 'very carefully to allow for the remaining questions.'"

■ **STATEMENTS OF NUMEROUS 9/11 COMMISSION MEMBERS, COMMISSION STAFF INVESTIGATORS, THE CO-CHAIR OF THE JOINT INQUIRY, FBI OFFICIALS, AND THE PRESIDENT'S OWN DEPUTY NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR BEN RHODES, HAVE CONFIRMED THAT THERE IS CREDIBLE EVIDENCE THAT SAUDI GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES ASSISTED THE HIJACKERS, AND THAT ELEMENTS OF THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT SUPPORTED AL QAEDA.**

Public accounts indicate that the 28 pages discuss evidence implicating Fahad al Thumairy, a cleric and accredited diplomat resident in the Islamic Affairs office of the Saudi Consulate in Los Angeles; Omar al Bayoumi, a Saudi identified in FBI reports as a likely employee of the Saudi government reporting on activities of Saudis in the U.S.; Osama Basnan, another mysterious Saudi whom FBI reports indicate was possibly being groomed as Bayoumi's replacement; and officials of the Islamic Affairs Department of the Saudi Embassy in Washington, D.C., in providing support to the 9/11 hijackers.

9/11 Commission members, Commission staff investigators, FBI officials, and the Chair of the 9/11 Joint Inquiry have publicly endorsed the strength of this evidence.

Final Report of the 9/11 Commission: "[9/11 hijackers] Hazmi and Mihdhar were ill prepared for a mission in the United States. Their only qualifications for this plot were their devotion to Usama bin Ladin, their veteran service, and their ability to get valid U.S. visas. Neither had spent any substantial time in the West, and neither spoke much, if any, English."

"We believe it is unlikely that Hazmi and Mihdhar ... would have come to the United States without arranging to receive assistance from one or more individuals informed in advance of their arrival."

"It's not an exoneration. What we said – we did not, with this report, exonerate the Saudis ... you can't provide the money for terrorists and then say, 'I don't have anything to do with what they're doing.'" 9/11 Commissioner Bob Kerrey on 60 Minutes, April 10, 2016.

"[W]e certainly did not exonerate the Saudis...Saudi was a fertile ground for fundraising for al-Qaida. Some of these issues continue to be problems today. That's why we need to continue to get to the bottom of this." 9/11 Commissioner Tim Roemer, Associated Press.

“The circumstantial evidence makes [Fahad al] Thumairy a logical person to consider as a possible point of contact for Hazmi and Mihdhar [upon their arrival in the United States].”

To this point, 9/11 Commissioner Lehman *in his sworn Affidavit* filed in the 9/11 lawsuit also said: “[I]t is implausible to suggest that the broad spectrum of evidence developed by the 9/11 Commission concerning the relationships among Omar al Bayoumi, Fahad al Thumairy, the Islamic Affairs Departments of Saudi diplomatic missions, and 9/11 hijackers Nawaf al Hazmi and Khalid al Mihdhar can be explained away as merely coincidental. To the contrary, I believe Nawaf al Hazmi and Khalid al Mihdhar knew who to go to for support, and that their initial encounter with Omar al Bayoumi immediately following al Bayoumi’s meeting with Fahad al Thumairy was not at all coincidental. I also believe that Fahad al Thumairy and Omar al Bayoumi knew that al Mihdhar and al Hazmi were bad actors who intended to do harm to the United States, and that the evidence concerning the activities of these principal actors in the events surrounding the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 warrants further examination.”

“By the time our Commission began its work, it was already well known in intelligence circles that the Islamic Affairs Departments of Saudi Arabia’s diplomatic missions were deeply involved in supporting Islamic extremists.”
Sworn Affirmation of 9/11 Commissioner John Lehman.

“There was Saudi fundraising, Saudi support...no way the two terrorists that helped to pull off the attacks could have gone into southern California and San Diego and Los Angeles without help ahead of time.”
There was “somebody from the Saudi consulate in Los Angeles that we saw doing a lot of things allegedly helping terrorists.” 9/11 Commissioner Tim Roemer added this on MSNBC’s Morning Joe, April 21, 2016.

9/11 Commissioner Tim Roemer on 60 Minutes: “L.A., San Diego, that’s really you know, the hornet’s nest. That’s really the one that I continue to think about almost on a daily basis.”

“[Thumairy] is a very interesting person in the whole 9/11 episode of who might’ve helped whom – in Los Angeles and San Diego, with two terrorists who didn’t know their way around.”

[After Bayoumi meets with Thumairy in the Saudi consulate] “Hazmi and Mihdhar magically run into Bayoumi in a restaurant that Bayoumi claims is a coincidence and in one of the biggest cities in the United States. He decides to not only befriend them but then to help them move to San Diego and get residence.”

And according to the Associated Press, which interviewed Ambassador Roemer: “Roemer said many questions remain about the roles of Fahad al Thumairy, an official at the Saudi consulate in Los Angeles who allegedly helped two of the hijackers find housing and transportation after they arrived in Southern California. *Al Thumairy was later denied entry into the United States in May 2003 after the State Department alleged that he might be involved in terrorist activity.* Roemer also wants to know more about Omar al Bayoumi, who was strongly suspected of being a Saudi spy and was alleged to have been helpful to the hijackers.”

The FBI Assistant Agent in Charge of the San Diego Field Office (2001-2002), Richard Lambert, said this to the New York Times: “I have to believe something was planned for the care and nurturing of these guys after they arrived.” “They weren’t too sophisticated, and they didn’t speak English. They needed help getting settled and making preparations.” “It’s one of those cases where there are an awful lot of very troubling coincidences.”

On that possibility, 9/11 Commissioner John Lehman said on 60 Minutes: “I don’t believe in coincidences.”

An FBI Report issued in 2012 (8 years after publication of 9/11 Commission Final Report) indicates that *Thumairy “immediately assigned an individual to take care of al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar during their time in the Los Angeles area [upon the hijackers’ arrival in the U.S.]”*

Senator Bob Graham, the Co-Chair of the 9/11 Congressional Joint Inquiry and former Chair of the Senate Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *in his sworn affidavit*: “I am convinced that ... a Saudi government agent living in the United States, Omar al Bayoumi, provided direct assistance to September 11th hijackers Nawaf al Hazmi and Khalid al Mihdhar. Based on the evidence discovered by the Joint Inquiry, I further believe that al Bayoumi was acting at the direction of elements of the Saudi government and that an official from the Islamic and Cultural Affairs section of the Saudi Consulate in Los Angeles, Fahad al Thumairy, likely played some role in the support network for the September 11th Attacks.”

“[A] lot of the money, the seed money if you will, for what became Al Qaeda, came out of Saudi Arabia,” and “*within the [Saudi] government*” “there may be individuals who, you know, who are operating, who kind of get to do their own thing” and there was “insufficient attention to where all this money was going over many years *from the government apparatus.*” President Obama’s Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes in an interview with David Axelrod on CNN, April 18, 2016.

■ **A LATE DRAFT OF THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT INCLUDED FINDINGS IMPLICATING THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT IN THE ATTACKS, BUT WAS REWRITTEN AT THE 11TH HOUR.**

Phillip Shenon’s authoritative account of the 9/11 Commission’s work, *The Commission*, confirms that the staff members who led the 9/11 “plot” investigation “felt strongly that they had demonstrated a close Saudi government connection to the two hijackers in San Diego” based on “explosive material on the Saudis: the actions of Omar al-Bayoumi, the Saudi ‘ghost employee’ who played host to the two hijackers in San Diego, and Fahad al-Thumairy, the shadowy Saudi diplomat in Los Angeles.” However, their final draft outlining their findings was rewritten by senior Commission staff “close to midnight on one of the final days of editing.” The revised version of the chapter “removed virtually all of the most serious allegations against the Saudis.”

The revisions were undertaken based on the view that the Report should not include allegations of Saudi involvement that could not be demonstrated by “100 percent proof of guilt.”

The unnamed 9/11 Commissioner quoted in the Guardian said: “I know some members of the [Commission] staff felt we went much too easy on the Saudis. I didn’t really know the extent of it until after the report came out.”

■ **FAHAD AL THUMAIRY AND OTHER SAUDIS IMPLICATED IN SUPPORTING THE HIJACKERS LIED TO THE 9/11 COMMISSION INVESTIGATORS, FRUSTRATING THE INVESTIGATION INTO SAUDI INVOLVEMENT IN THE ATTACKS.**

The Memoranda for the Record summarizing the 9/11 Commission’s interviews of Thumairy, Bayoumi, and Basnan indicate that they lied to the 9/11 investigators during their interviews. For instance, Thumairy initially denied knowing Bayoumi at all, even though phone records documented numerous communications between the two, and despite the fact that Bayoumi acknowledged knowing Thumairy. Bayoumi and Basnan similarly denied knowing one another, despite witness statements identifying them as the “closest of friends,” and even though “phone records reveal roughly 700 calls between various phones subscribed to by Bayoumi and Basnan over a one year period.”

“It was so clear Thumairy was lying,” a commission staffer said later. “It was also so clear he was dangerous.”
9/11 Commission Staff Investigator, The Guardian, May 13, 2016.

The 9/11 Commission Memorandum for the Record concerning the Thumairy Interview: “Our general impression of Thumairy is that he was deceptive during both interviews. His answers were either inconsistent or, at times, in direct conflict with information we have from other sources. During some of the more pointed exchanges, his body language suggested that he grew increasingly uncomfortable (for instance, he would cross his arms, sit back in his chair, etc.)”

The 9/11 Commission Memorandum for the Record concerning the Basnan Interview: “The interview [of Basnan] failed to yield any new information of note. Instead, in the writer’s opinion, it established beyond cavil the witness’ utter lack of credibility on virtually every material subject. This assessment is based on: the witness’ demeanor, which engendered a combination of confrontation, evasiveness, and speechmaking, presumably for the benefit of his Mabahith [Saudi Intelligence] audience; his repudiation of statements made by him on prior occasions; and the inherent incredibility of many of his assertions when viewed in light of the totality of the available evidence.”

■ **THE 9/11 COMMISSION AND NUMEROUS U.S. INVESTIGATIONS HAVE CONFIRMED THAT SAUDI “CHARITIES” FOUNDED, SUPERVISED, AND FUNDED BY THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT TO SPREAD WAHHABI ISLAM FUNDED AL QAEDA DURING THE DECADE PRIOR TO 9/11.**

In the sentence immediately following its statement concerning the Saudi government “as an institution” and “senior Saudi officials,” the 9/11 Commission expressly stated that “*This conclusion does not exclude the likelihood that charities with significant Saudi government sponsorship diverted funds to al Qaeda.*” The 9/11 Commission Report explains that these charities are used by the Saudi government “to spread Wahhabi beliefs throughout the world” and are “regulated by the [Kingdom’s] Ministry of Islamic Affairs.”

The 9/11 Commission staffs’ separate Monograph on Terrorist Financing further confirmed that “al Qaeda was funded, to the tune of approximately \$30 million per year, by diversions of money from Islamic charities” and that the “Saudis generally resisted cooperating more broadly against al Qaeda financing” until after al Qaeda attacked the Kingdom itself in 2003.

The Saudi Wahhabi “charities” implicated in terrorist financing by U.S. government reports and communications include (among others) al Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHIF), International Islamic Relief Agency (IIRO), and Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia & Herzegovina (SHC). Despite U.S. investigations implicating them in the financing of terrorism and promotion of extremist Wahhabi ideologies, few of these entities have ever been designated as terror sponsors or sanctioned in any way, and many of them continue to operate on a global basis today.

The Kingdom’s “response” to the evidence relating to the misconduct of its charities curiously references only al Haramain, evades entirely the Saudi government’s own role in the many Saudi organizations implicated in supporting al Qaeda, and perversely suggests that the United States is to blame for not having demanded with sufficient force that the Kingdom police its own institutions before 9/11. *Some of the actual facts* are as follows:

Al Haramain: According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury “AHIF is one of the principal Islamic [organizations] providing support for the al Qaida network and promoting militant Islamic doctrine worldwide.” U.S. Department of the Treasury, June 2, 2004.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia agrees, having itself described AHIF as “one of the biggest terror-financing operations in the world and the funding organ and channel for the Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam bombings in 1998.” Saudi White Paper at p. 14.

The Kingdom applauds itself for closing al Haramain offices at the urging of the United States, but fails to disclose the Saudi government’s extensive role in al Haramain:

“al Haramain operates under the supervision of the Saudi Minister of Islamic Affairs, who appoints its Board of Directors and senior management personnel.” Sworn Affirmation of Khalid bin Obaid Azzahri, Financial and Administrative Manager of al Haramain, April 7, 2004.

SHC: “Post [the American Embassy in Sarajevo] strongly recommends ... the Saudi High Commission for Relief ... for immediate designation under E.O. 13224 [the Executive Order 13224 Specially Designated Global Terrorist program].” Declassified State Department Cable, August 2003.

“The following is a list of terrorist and terrorist support entities identified as associate forces...Saudi High Commission for Relief.” JTF-GTMO Matrix of Threat Indicators for Enemy Combatants.

“The Saudi High Commission is an arm of the Saudi Arabian government. Actions taken by the Saudi High Commission may be viewed as actions of the government of Saudi Arabia.” Affirmation of Dr. Mutlib bin Abdullah Al-Nafissa, Minister of State, Council of Ministers of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The SHC has claimed and been granted immunity from the 9/11 suit as an arm of the Saudi government.

“al Haramain has considerable ties to the Saudi government. Two government ministers have supervisory roles (nominal or otherwise) over al Haramain, and there is some evidence that low-level Saudi officials had substantial influence over various [al Haramain] offices outside of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government has also historically provided financial support to al Haramain.” 9/11 Commission Staff Monograph on Terrorist Financing.

■ **IIRO: “USAMA BIN LADIN USED THE ENTIRE IIRO NETWORK FOR HIS TERRORIST ACTIVITIES.” 2007 STATE DEPARTMENT DIPLOMATIC CABLE.**

“The United States is also aware of IIRO’s significant illegitimate and illegal activities that fund terrorist activity. We have been concerned about IIRO for many years now and have shared our concerns with the Government of Saudi Arabia on a regular basis.” 2006 State Department Cable titled “Terrorism Financing: International Islamic Relief Organization.”

“Abd Al Hamid Sulaiman Al-Mujil (Al-Mujil) is the Executive Director of the IIRO Eastern Province (IIRO-EP) branch office in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Al-Mujil has been called the ‘million dollar man’ for supporting Islamic militant groups...Al-Mujil provided donor funds directly to al Qaida.” Treasury Department Statement, 2006.

“IIRO’s support for terrorist organizations began in the early 1990s and continues to through at least the first half of 2006.” Partially Declassified Treasury Department Memorandum, 2006.

“IIRO is an instrumentality of the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, IIRO is immune from suit.” Amended Answer of IIRO, *In Re Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001*, United States District Court for the Southern District of New York.

“For their guiding principles, the leaders of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, are open and clear about their almost exclusive commitment to the Wahhabi movement of Sunni Islam. The group circulates images of Wahhabi religious textbooks from Saudi Arabia in the schools it controls. Videos from the group’s territory have shown Wahhabi texts plastered on the sides of an official missionary van.” *ISIS’s Harsh Brand of Islam is Rooted in Austere Saudi Creed*, David Kirkpatrick, *New York Times*, September 24, 2014.

■ **THE KINGDOM’S PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFERINGS IGNORE SAUDI ARABIA’S PARAMOUNT ROLE IN PROPAGATING THE EXTREMIST WAHHABI IDEOLOGY AND THEREBY FUELING THE RISE OF TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS LIKE AL QAEDA AND ISIS AND BREEDING NEW JIHADISTS TO THIS DAY.**

Any evaluation of Saudi Arabia’s historical role in terrorism and present commitment to combat terrorist activity must take into consideration the Kingdom’s involvement in propagating extremist ideologies that contribute to radicalization, terrorist recruitment, and the growth of global jihadism.

Within just the last 21 months, prominent reports in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* have documented the direct links between the Kingdom’s ongoing efforts to promote the spread of Wahhabi Islam and the emergence of ISIS, the radicalization of Muslim communities in Belgium, the rise of Boko Haram and al Shabaab in Africa, and transformation of Kosovo into a recruitment hotbed for ISIS. Several of these articles are listed below and included as attachments.

The World Reaps What the Saudis Sow, Editorial Board, *New York Times*, May 27, 2016: “[T]he kingdom has spent untold millions promoting Wahhabism, the radical form of Sunni Islam that inspired the 9/11 hijackers and that now inflames the Islamic State.”

How Kosovo was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS, Carlotta Gall, *New York Times*, May 21, 2006: “Saudi money and influence have transformed this once-tolerant Muslim society at the hem of Europe into a font of Islamic extremism and a pipeline for jihadists.”

The Saudi Origins of Belgium’s Islamist Threat, Ishaan Tharoor, *Washington Post*, March 23, 2006: “[I]n April 2012 the Belgian government quietly forced Saudi authorities to remove the main director of the Great Mosque [of Belgium], Khalid Alabri, a **Saudi Embassy employee** suspected of propagating the intolerant Sunni radicalism that is shared by the extremists of the Islamic State.”

Jihad Comes to Africa, Yaroslav Trofimov, *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2016: “[Saudi Arabia’s] oil-funded missionary campaign has helped to spread Sunni religious zeal throughout Africa.”

The Terrorists the Saudis Cultivate in Peaceful Countries, Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*, July 2, 2016: “Whenever there is a terrorist attack by Muslim extremists, we look to our enemies like the Islamic State or Al Qaeda. But perhaps we should also look to our ‘friends,’ like Saudi Arabia.”

The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

The World Reaps What the Saudis Sow

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD MAY 27, 2016

Saudi Arabia has frustrated American policy makers for years. Ostensibly a critical ally, sheltered from its enemies by American arms and aid, the kingdom has spent untold millions promoting Wahhabism, the radical form of Sunni Islam that inspired the 9/11 hijackers and that now inflames the Islamic State.

The latest chapter in this long, sorrowful history involves tiny Kosovo. With a population of only 1.8 million people, Kosovo has sent more of its young people per capita than any other country to fight and die in Iraq and Syria. Since 2012, some 314 Kosovars have joined the Islamic State, including two suicide bombers, 44 women and 28 children. Even Belgium, widely seen as a hotbed of extremism after the attacks on Paris and Brussels, lags behind it in the recruitment rankings.

As detailed by Carlotta Gall in a recent article in *The Times*, Kosovo is in this position largely because Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states have spent years developing and funding a network of imams, mosques and secretive associations there. And while there is no evidence that any group gave money directly and explicitly to persuade Kosovars to go to Syria, senior officials in Kosovo told Ms. Gall that extremist clerics and groups have spent heavily to promote radical Islamic thinking among young and vulnerable people. “The issue is they supported thinkers who promote violence and jihad in the name of protecting Islam,” Fatos Makolli, head of Kosovo’s counterterrorism police, told her.

The United States and NATO invested heavily in helping Kosovo gain independence from Serbia in 2008 and establish democracy. That Saudi Arabia should be using Kosovo as a breeding ground for extremists, or allowing it to be used as a breeding ground by any Saudi entity or citizen, is a cruel reminder of the contradictory and even duplicitous behavior of America's partners in the Persian Gulf and helps to explain why its relationships with those countries have become increasingly troubled.

Kosovo, rescued from Serbian oppression after months of NATO bombing in 1999, has been known as a tolerant society. For centuries, the Muslim majority has followed the liberal Hanafi version of Islam, which is accepting of others. Since the war, that tradition has been threatened by Saudi-trained imams, their costs paid by Saudi-sponsored charities, preaching the primacy of Shariah law and fostering violent jihad and takfirism, which authorizes the killing of Muslims viewed as heretics.

Most Kosovars have resisted such proselytizing, and officials in Kosovo say that support for the United States and the West remains strong. Yet experts point to a number of reasons the country has been fertile ground for recruitment to radical ideology: a large population of young people living in rural poverty with little hope of jobs; corruption and an attendant lack of faith in government; and, according to a 2015 report by the Kosovar Center for Security Studies, an education system that does not encourage critical thinking.

It remains unclear why Kosovo's government, as well as the United States and the United Nations officials who administered postwar Kosovo, did not act sooner. The Americans may have erred in assuming that Kosovo's moderate religious community would prevent extremism from flourishing.

The 9/11 attacks quickly clarified the dangers. Several Saudi organizations in Kosovo were closed, and the Saudi government, which appears to have reduced its aid to Kosovo, now insists that it has imposed strict controls on charities, mosques and clerical teachings. Even so, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have increased funding for Islamic hard-liners in Kosovo.

The Sunni Arab states still do not seem to understand the extent to which extreme versions of Islam imperil them as well. Although the Saudi royal family relies on the Wahhabi clerics for their political legitimacy, the Islamic State accuses the monarchy of corrupting the faith to preserve its power. Since 2014, there have been 20 terrorist attacks in the kingdom, many staged by ISIS.

The Kosovo government, working with the United States, has acted to combat extremism by adopting new antiterror laws, cracking down on the money laundering that underwrites radical groups and stepping up police investigations. The flow of Kosovo's citizens heading to fight with the Islamic State apparently has fallen to zero in the last seven months, while the number of Kosovars on the battlefield is down to 140.

Yet at least two radical imams continue to preach in Kosovo's capital, Pristina, and draw crowds of young men. Much work is still to be done to protect the independence and spirit of tolerance that Kosovo worked so hard to achieve.

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How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS

Extremist clerics and secretive associations funded by Saudis and others have transformed a once-tolerant Muslim society into a font of extremism.

By CARLOTTA GALL MAY 21, 2016

PRISTINA, Kosovo — Every Friday, just yards from a statue of Bill Clinton with arm aloft in a cheery wave, hundreds of young bearded men make a show of kneeling to pray on the sidewalk outside an improvised mosque in a former furniture store.

The mosque is one of scores built here with Saudi government money and blamed for spreading Wahhabism — the conservative ideology dominant in Saudi Arabia — in the 17 years since an American-led intervention wrested tiny Kosovo from Serbian oppression.

Since then — much of that time under the watch of American officials — Saudi money and influence have transformed this once-tolerant Muslim society at the hem of Europe into a font of Islamic extremism and a pipeline for jihadists.

Kosovo now finds itself, like the rest of Europe, fending off the threat of radical Islam. Over the last two years, the police have identified 314 Kosovars — including two suicide bombers, 44 women and 28 children — who have gone abroad to join the Islamic State, the highest number per capita in Europe.

They were radicalized and recruited, Kosovo investigators say, by a corps of extremist clerics and secretive associations funded by Saudi Arabia and other

conservative Arab gulf states using an obscure, labyrinthine network of donations from charities, private individuals and government ministries.

“They promoted political Islam,” said Fatos Makolli, the director of Kosovo’s counterterrorism police. “They spent a lot of money to promote it through different programs mainly with young, vulnerable people, and they brought in a lot of Wahhabi and Salafi literature. They brought these people closer to radical political Islam, which resulted in their radicalization.”

After two years of investigations, the police have charged 67 people, arrested 14 imams and shut down 19 Muslim organizations for acting against the Constitution, inciting hatred and recruiting for terrorism. The most recent sentences, which included a 10-year prison term, were handed down on Friday.

It is a stunning turnabout for a land of 1.8 million people that not long ago was among the most pro-American Muslim societies in the world. Americans were welcomed as liberators after leading months of NATO bombing in 1999 that spawned an independent Kosovo.

After the war, United Nations officials administered the territory and American forces helped keep the peace. The Saudis arrived, too, bringing millions of euros in aid to a poor and war-ravaged land.

But where the Americans saw a chance to create a new democracy, the Saudis saw a new land to spread Wahhabism.

“There is no evidence that any organization gave money directly to people to go to Syria,” Mr. Makolli said. “The issue is they supported thinkers who promote violence and jihad in the name of protecting Islam.”

Kosovo now has over 800 mosques, 240 of them built since the war and blamed for helping indoctrinate a new generation in Wahhabism. They are part of what moderate imams and officials here describe as a deliberate, long-term strategy by Saudi Arabia to reshape Islam in its image, not only in Kosovo but around the world.

Saudi diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in 2015 reveal a system of funding for mosques, Islamic centers and Saudi-trained clerics that spans Asia,

Africa and Europe. In New Delhi alone, 140 Muslim preachers are listed as on the Saudi Consulate's payroll.

All around Kosovo, families are grappling with the aftermath of years of proselytizing by Saudi-trained preachers. Some daughters refuse to shake hands with or talk to male relatives. Some sons have gone off to jihad. Religious vigilantes have threatened — or committed — violence against academics, journalists and politicians.

The Balkans, Europe's historical fault line, have yet to heal from the ethnic wars of the 1990s. But they are now infected with a new intolerance, moderate imams and officials in the region warn.

How Kosovo and the very nature of its society was fundamentally recast is a story of a decades-long global ambition by Saudi Arabia to spread its hard-line version of Islam — heavily funded and systematically applied, including with threats and intimidation by followers.

The Missionaries Arrive

After the war ended in 1999, Idriz Bilalli, the imam of the central mosque in Podujevo, welcomed any help he could get.

Podujevo, home to about 90,000 people in northeast Kosovo, was a reasonably prosperous town with high schools and small businesses in an area hugged by farmland and forests. It was known for its strong Muslim tradition even in a land where people long wore their religion lightly.

After decades of Communist rule when Kosovo was part of Yugoslavia, men and women mingle freely, schools are coeducational, and girls rarely wear the veil. Still, Serbian paramilitary forces burned down 218 mosques as part of their war against Kosovo's ethnic Albanians, who are 95 percent Muslim. Mr. Bilalli needed help to rebuild.

When two imams in their 30s, Fadil Musliu and Fadil Sogojeva, who were studying for master's degrees in Saudi Arabia, showed up after the war with money to organize summer religion courses, Mr. Bilalli agreed to help.

The imams were just two of some 200 Kosovars who took advantage of scholarships after the war to study Islam in Saudi Arabia. Many, like them, returned with missionary zeal.

Soon, under Mr. Musliu's tutelage, pupils started adopting a rigid manner of prayer, foreign to the moderate Islamic traditions of this part of Europe. Mr. Bilalli recognized the influence, and he grew concerned.

"This is Wahhabism coming into our society," Mr. Bilalli, 52, said in a recent interview.

Mr. Bilalli trained at the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia in the late 1980s, and as a student he had been warned by a Kosovar professor to guard against the cultural differences of Wahhabism. He understood there was a campaign of proselytizing, pushed by the Saudis.

"The first thing the Wahhabis do is to take members of our congregation, who understand Islam in the traditional Kosovo way that we had for generations, and try to draw them away from this understanding," he said. "Once they get them away from the traditional congregation, then they start bombarding them with radical thoughts and ideas."

"The main goal of their activity is to create conflict between people," he said. "This first creates division, and then hatred, and then it can come to what happened in Arab countries, where war starts because of these conflicting ideas."

From the outset, the newly arriving clerics sought to overtake the Islamic Community of Kosovo, an organization that for generations has been the custodian of the tolerant form of Islam that was practiced in the region, townspeople and officials say.

Muslims in Kosovo, which was a part of the Ottoman Empire for 500 years, follow the Hanafi school of Islam, traditionally a liberal version that is accepting of other religions.

But all around the country, a new breed of radical preachers was setting up in neighborhood mosques, often newly built with Saudi money.

In some cases, centuries-old buildings were bulldozed, including a historic library in Gjakova and several 400-year-old mosques, as well as shrines, graveyards and Dervish monasteries, all considered idolatrous in Wahhabi teaching.

From their bases, the Saudi-trained imams propagated Wahhabism's tenets: the supremacy of Sharia law as well as ideas of violent jihad and takfirism, which authorizes the killing of Muslims considered heretics for not following its interpretation of Islam.

The Saudi-sponsored charities often paid salaries and overhead costs, and financed courses in religion, as well as English and computer classes, moderate imams and investigators explained.

But the charitable assistance often had conditions attached. Families were given monthly stipends on the condition that they attended sermons in the mosque and that women and girls wore the veil, human rights activists said.

"People were so needy, there was no one who did not join," recalled Ajnishahe Halimi, a politician who campaigned to have a radical Albanian imam expelled after families complained of abuse.

Threats Intensify

Within a few years of the war's end, the older generation of traditional clerics began to encounter aggression from young Wahhabis.

Paradoxically, some of the most serious tensions built in Gjilan, an eastern Kosovo town of about 90,000, where up to 7,000 American troops were stationed as part of Kosovo's United Nations-run peacekeeping force at Camp Bondsteel.

“They came in the name of aid,” one moderate imam in Gjilan, Enver Rexhepi, said of the Arab charities. “But they came with a background of different intentions, and that’s where the Islamic religion started splitting here.”

One day in 2004, he recalled, he was threatened by one of the most aggressive young Wahhabis, Zekirja Qazimi, a former madrasa student then in his early 20s.

Inside his mosque, Mr. Rexhepi had long displayed an Albanian flag. Emblazoned with a double-headed eagle, it was a popular symbol of Kosovo’s liberation struggle.

But strict Muslim fundamentalists consider the depiction of any living being as idolatrous. Mr. Qazimi tore the flag down. Mr. Rexhepi put it back.

“It will not go long like this,” Mr. Qazimi told him angrily, Mr. Rexhepi recounted.

Within days, Mr. Rexhepi was abducted and savagely beaten by masked men in woods above Gjilan. He later accused Mr. Qazimi of having been behind the attack, but police investigations went nowhere.

Ten years later, in 2014, after two young Kosovars blew themselves up in suicide bombings in Iraq and Turkey, investigators began an extensive investigation into the sources of radicalism. Mr. Qazimi was arrested hiding in the same woods. On Friday, a court sentenced him to 10 years in prison after he faced charges of inciting hatred and recruiting for a terrorist organization.

Before Mr. Qazimi was arrested, his influence was profound, under what investigators now say was the sway of Egyptian-based extremists and the patronage of Saudi and other gulf Arab sponsors.

By the mid-2000s, Saudi money and Saudi-trained clerics were already exerting influence over the Islamic Community of Kosovo. The leadership quietly condoned the drift toward conservatism, critics of the organization say.

Mr. Qazimi was appointed first to a village mosque, and then to El-Kuddus mosque on the edge of Gjilan. Few could counter him, not even Mustafa Bajrami, his former teacher, who was elected head of the Islamic Community of Gjilan in 2012.

Mr. Bajrami comes from a prominent religious family — his father was the first chief mufti of Yugoslavia during the Communist period. He holds a doctorate in Islamic studies. Yet he remembers pupils began rebelling against him whenever he spoke against Wahhabism.

He soon realized that the students were being taught beliefs that differed from the traditional moderate curriculum by several radical imams in lectures after hours. He banned the use of mosques after official prayer times.

Hostility only grew. He would notice a dismissive gesture in the congregation during his sermons, or someone would curse his wife, or mutter “apostate” or “infidel” as he passed.

In the village, Mr. Qazimi’s influence eventually became so disruptive that residents demanded his removal after he forbade girls and boys to shake hands. But in Gjilan he continued to draw dozens of young people to his after-hours classes.

“They were moving 100 percent according to lessons they were taking from Zekirja Qazimi,” Mr. Bajrami said in an interview. “One hundred percent, in an ideological way.”

Extremism Spreads

Over time, the Saudi-trained imams expanded their work.

By 2004, Mr. Musliu, one of the master’s degree students from Podujevo who studied in Saudi Arabia, had graduated and was imam of a mosque in the capital, Pristina.

In Podujevo, he set up a local charitable organization called Devotshmeria, or Devotion, which taught religion classes and offered social programs for women, orphans and the poor. It was funded by Al Waqf al Islami, a Saudi organization that was one of the 19 eventually closed by investigators.

Mr. Musliu put a cousin, Jetmir Rrahmani, in charge.

“Then I knew something was starting that would not bring any good,” said Mr. Bilalli, the moderate cleric who had started out teaching with him. In 2004, they had a core of 20 Wahhabis.

“That was only the beginning,” Mr. Bilalli said. “They started multiplying.”

Mr. Bilalli began a vigorous campaign against the spread of unauthorized mosques and Wahhabi teaching. In 2008, he was elected head of the Islamic Community of Podujevo and instituted religion classes for women, in an effort to undercut Devotshmeria.

As he sought to curb the extremists, Mr. Bilalli received death threats, including a note left in the mosque’s alms box. An anonymous telephone caller vowed to make him and his family disappear, he said.

“Anyone who opposes them, they see as an enemy,” Mr. Bilalli said.

He appealed to the leadership of the Islamic Community of Kosovo. But by then it was heavily influenced by Arab gulf sponsors, he said, and he received little support.

When Mr. Bilalli formed a union of fellow moderates, the Islamic Community of Kosovo removed him from his post. His successor, Bekim Jashari, equally concerned by the Saudi influence, nevertheless kept up the fight.

“I spent 10 years in Arab countries and specialized in sectarianism within Islam,” Mr. Jashari said. “It’s very important to stop Arab sectarianism from being introduced to Kosovo.”

Mr. Jashari had a couple of brief successes. He blocked the Saudi-trained imam Mr. Sogojeva from opening a new mosque, and stopped a payment of 20,000 euros, about \$22,400, intended for it from the Saudi charity Al Waqf al Islami.

He also began a website, *Speak Now*, to counter Wahhabi teaching. But he remains so concerned about Wahhabi preachers that he never lets his 19-year-old son attend prayers on his own.

The radical imams Mr. Musliu and Mr. Sogojeva still preach in Pristina, where for prayers they draw crowds of young men who glare at foreign reporters.

Mr. Sogojeva dresses in a traditional robe and banded cleric's hat, but his newly built mosque is an incongruous modern multistory building. He admonished his congregation with a rapid-fire list of dos and don'ts in a recent Friday sermon.

Neither imam seems to lack funds.

In an interview, Mr. Musliu insisted that he was financed by local donations, but confirmed that he had received Saudi funding for his early religion courses.

The instruction, he said, is not out of line with Kosovo's traditions. The increase in religiosity among young people was natural after Kosovo gained its freedom, he said.

"Those who are not believers and do not read enough, they feel a bit shocked," he said. "But we coordinated with other imams, and everything was in line with Islam."

A Tilt Toward Terrorism

The influence of the radical clerics reached its apex with the war in Syria, as they extolled the virtues of jihad and used speeches and radio and television talks shows to urge young people to go there.

Mr. Qazimi, who was given the 10-year prison sentence, even organized a summer camp for his young followers.

"It is obligated for every Muslim to participate in jihad," he told them in one videotaped talk. "The Prophet Muhammad says that if someone has a chance to take part in jihad and doesn't, he will die with great sins."

“The blood of infidels is the best drink for us Muslims,” he said in another recording.

Among his recruits, investigators say, were three former civilian employees of American contracting companies at Camp Bondsteel, where American troops are stationed. They included Lavdrim Muhaxheri, an Islamic State leader who was filmed executing a man in Syria with a rocket-propelled grenade.

After the suicide bombings, the authorities opened a broad investigation and found that the Saudi charity Al Waqf al Islami had been supporting associations set up by preachers like Mr. Qazimi in almost every regional town.

Al Waqf al Islami was established in the Balkans in 1989. Most of its financing came from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain, Kosovo investigators said in recent interviews. Unexplained gaps in its ledgers deepened suspicions that the group was surreptitiously funding clerics who were radicalizing young people, they said.

Investigators from Kosovo’s Financial Intelligence Unit found that Al Waqf al Islami, which had an office in central Pristina and a staff of 12, ran through €10 million from 2000 through 2012. Yet they found little paperwork to explain much of the spending.

More than €1 million went to mosque building. But one and a half times that amount was disbursed in unspecified cash withdrawals, which may have also gone to enriching its staff, the investigators said.

Only 7 percent of the budget was shown to have gone to caring for orphans, the charity’s stated mission.

By the summer of 2014, the Kosovo police shut down Al Waqf al Islami, along with 12 other Islamic charities, and arrested 40 people.

The charity’s head offices, in Saudi Arabia and the Netherlands, have since changed their name to Al Waqf, apparently separating themselves from the Balkans operation.

Asked about the accusations in a telephone interview, Nasr el Damanhoury, the director of Al Waqf in the Netherlands, said he had no direct knowledge of his group's operations in Kosovo or the Balkans.

The charity has ceased all work outside the Netherlands since he took over in 2013, he said. His predecessor had returned to Morocco and could not be reached, and Saudi board members would not comment, he said.

“Our organization has never supported extremism,” Mr. Damanhoury said. “I have known it since 1989. I joined them three years ago. They have always been a mild group.”

Unheeded Warnings

Why the Kosovar authorities — and American and United Nations overseers — did not act sooner to forestall the spread of extremism is a question being intensely debated.

As early as 2004, the prime minister at the time, Bajram Rexhepi, tried to introduce a law to ban extremist sects. But, he said in a recent interview at his home in northern Kosovo, European officials told him that it would violate freedom of religion.

“It was not in their interest, they did not want to irritate some Islamic countries,” Mr. Rexhepi said. “They simply did not do anything.”

Not everyone was unaware of the dangers, however.

At a meeting in 2003, Richard C. Holbrooke, once the United States special envoy to the Balkans, warned Kosovar leaders not to work with the Saudi Joint Relief Committee for Kosovo, an umbrella organization of Saudi charities whose name still appears on many of the mosques built since the war, along with that of the former Saudi interior minister, Prince Naif bin Abdul-Aziz.

A year later, it was among several Saudi organizations that were shut down in Kosovo when it came under suspicion as a front for Al Qaeda. Another was Al-

Haramain, which in 2004 was designated by the United States Treasury Department as having links to terrorism.

Yet even as some organizations were shut down, others kept working. Staff and equipment from Al-Haramain shifted to Al Waqf al Islami, moderate imams familiar with their activities said.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia appears to have reduced its aid to Kosovo. Kosovo Central Bank figures show grants from Saudi Arabia averaging €100,000 a year for the past five years.

It is now money from Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates — which each average approximately €1 million a year — that propagates the same hard-line version of Islam. The payments come from foundations or individuals, or sometimes from the Ministry of Zakat (Almsgiving) from the various governments, Kosovo's investigators say.

But payments are often diverted through a second country to obscure their origin and destination, they said. One transfer of nearly €500,000 from a Saudi individual was frozen in 2014 since it was intended for a Kosovo teenager, according to the investigators and a State Department report.

Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations were still raising millions from “deep-pocket donors and charitable organizations” based in the gulf, the Treasury under secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, David S. Cohen, said in a speech in 2014 at the Center for a New American Security.

While Saudi Arabia has made progress in stamping out funding for Al Qaeda, sympathetic donors in the kingdom were still funding other terrorist groups, he said.

Today the Islamic Community of Kosovo has been so influenced by the largess of Arab donors that it has seeded prominent positions with radical clerics, its critics say.

Ahmet Sadriu, a spokesman for Islamic Community of Kosovo, said the group held to Kosovo's traditionally tolerant version of Islam. But calls are growing to

overhaul an organization now seen as having been corrupted by outside forces and money.

Kosovo's interior minister, Skender Hyseni, said he had recently reprimanded some of the senior religious officials.

"I told them they were doing a great disservice to their country," he said in an interview. "Kosovo is by definition, by Constitution, a secular society. There has always been historically an unspoken interreligious tolerance among Albanians here, and we want to make sure that we keep it that way."

Families Divided

For some in Kosovo, it may already be too late.

Families have been torn apart. Some of Kosovo's best and brightest have been caught up in the lure of jihad.

One of Kosovo's top political science graduates, Albert Berisha, said he left in 2013 to help the Syrian people in the uprising against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. He abandoned his attempt after only two weeks — and he says he never joined the Islamic State — but has been sentenced to three and a half years in prison, pending appeal.

Ismet Sakiqi, an official in the prime minister's office and a veteran of the liberation struggle, was shaken to find his 22-year-old son, Visar, a law student, arrested on his way through Turkey to Syria with his fiancée. He now visits his son in the same Kosovo prison where he was detained under Serbian rule.

And in the hamlet of Busavate, in the wooded hills of eastern Kosovo, a widower, Shemsi Maliqi, struggles to explain how his family has been divided. One of his sons, Alejhim, 27, has taken his family to join the Islamic State in Syria.

It remains unclear how Alejhim became radicalized. He followed his grandfather, training as an imam in Gjilan, and served in the village mosque for six years. Then, two years ago, he asked his father to help him travel to Egypt to study.

Mr. Maliqi still clings to the hope that his son is studying in Egypt rather than fighting in Syria. But Kosovo's counterterrorism police recently put out an international arrest warrant for Alejhim.

"Better that he comes back dead than alive," Mr. Maliqi, a poor farmer, said. "I sent him to school, not to war. I sold my cow for him."

Alejhim had married a woman from the nearby village of Vrbice who was so conservative that she was veiled up to her eyes and refused to shake hands with her brother-in-law.

The wife's mother angrily refused to be interviewed. Her daughter did what was expected and followed her husband to Syria, she said.

Secretly, Alejhim drew three others — his sister; his best friend, who married his sister; and his wife's sister — to follow him to Syria, too. The others have since returned, but remain radical and estranged from the family.

Alejhim's uncle, Fehmi Maliqi, like the rest of the family, is dismayed. "It's a catastrophe," he said.

A version of this article appears in print on May 22, 2016, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Making Kosovo Fertile Ground for ISIS.

The Washington Post

WorldViews

The Saudi origins of Belgium's Islamist threat

By [Ishaan Tharoor](#) March 23

The roots of Islamist extremism in Belgium are deep and complex. In the wake of Tuesday's attacks in Brussels, investigators are puzzling over the scope of the terrorist plot, in which bombs exploded in the capital's main airport and on its busy metro, killing at least 31 people and injuring at least 270.

There has been criticism of Belgium's security lapses and the dysfunctions dogging its multilingual police agencies. There is also focus on the country's particular problem of radicalization: It has had a greater share of its population join radical groups fighting in Syria than any other country in Europe; a Muslim-majority neighborhood in Brussels appears to be at the heart of terrorist plots, including the Islamic State's November assault on Paris.

A lot of ink has already been spilled on the complexity of the jihadist networks operating in Belgium, as well as the social factors — discrimination and alienation — luring some Belgian youths toward groups such as the Islamic State. It's also worth considering, though, an older history.

Analysts point to the inroads made in Belgium by the more conservative, orthodox brand of Islam espoused by the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This is the consequence of actual policy. In 1978, the Saudi-backed Great Mosque of Brussels opened its doors; the elegant building and land where it sat had been a gift by Belgium's then-king to his Saudi counterpart a decade prior.

It became the seat of Islamic activity in Belgium. A 2007 leaked U.S. diplomatic cable, published by the anti-secrecy site WikiLeaks, detailed how the Saudi Embassy in Brussels has continued to provide Korans to myriad mosques in the country and help pay for the upkeep of the structures. Saudi Arabia also invested in training the imams who would preach to a growing Muslim diaspora in European countries, including in Belgium.

Observers say the Salafist dogma of the Saudi-funded clerics active in many mosques in Belgium stood in contrast to the traditional beliefs of the mostly working-class Moroccan and Turkish immigrants who first arrived in the country in the 1960s and 1970s.

“The Moroccan community comes from mountainous regions and rift valleys, not the desert. They come from the Maliki school of Islam, and are a lot more tolerant and open than the Muslims from other regions like Saudi Arabia,” George Dallemagne, a Belgian politician, told the Independent last year. “However, many of them were re-Islamified by the Salafist clerics and teachers from the Great Mosque. Some Moroccans were even given scholarships to study in Medina, in Saudi Arabia.”

The majority of the Belgian nationals who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq are thought to be of Moroccan descent.

A separate WikiLeaks disclosure — this time of classified Saudi documents — found that in April 2012 the Belgian government quietly forced Saudi authorities to remove the main director of the Great Mosque, Khalid Alabri, a Saudi Embassy employee suspected of propagating the intolerant Sunni radicalism that is shared by the extremists of the Islamic State.

“Today, in Brussels, 95 percent of the courses offered on Islam for Muslims are operated by young preachers trained in Saudi Arabia,” Michael Privot, director of the Brussels-based European Network Against Racism, said in an interview with an Italian journalist. “There is a huge demand within Muslim communities to know about their religion, but most of the offer is filled by a very conservative Salafi type of Islam sponsored by Saudi Arabia. Other Muslim countries have been unable to offer grants to students on such a scale.”

Saudi Arabia is an avowed enemy of the Islamic State and has sought to rebuff criticism of its role in fomenting Sunni fundamentalist movements around the world. The current leadership of the Great Mosque in Brussels has rejected any link whatsoever to radical groups.

“Nobody like this [an Islamic State recruiter] can come here. I wouldn't allow them to come to this place, and they understand my way,” Jamal Saleh Momenah, the director of the mosque, told EUObserver last year.

As WorldViews noted earlier, the recent wave of Belgian jihadists is specifically less ideological than previous generations of militants and more animated by social alienation and local criminal networks.

But the wider legacy of Saudi policies has been increasingly noticed and criticized, particularly in Europe.

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“Wahhabi mosques are financed all over the world by Saudi Arabia. In Germany, many dangerous Islamists come from these communities,” Sigmar Gabriel, a leading German politician, [said](#) in December. An [unusually blunt memo](#), circulated around the same time, from Germany's chief intelligence agency attacked the Saudis for the supposedly destabilizing role they play in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Earlier this month, the Dutch government [voted to ban arms sales](#) to Saudi Arabia, an act symbolic both of European frustration with the Saudis and anger at the kingdom's continued, heavy-handed war effort in neighboring Yemen.

After the Brussels attacks this week, Saudi Arabia issued a strong condemnation of the violence.

“We learned with grief about the terrorist attacks that took place in Brussels which resulted in casualties and injuries,” King Salman said in [a cable](#) to his Belgian counterpart, King Philippe, adding that “we strongly condemn these criminal acts.” He continued: “We stress the importance of international efforts to confront and eliminate this dangerous scourge which is condemned by all divine religions and international norms and conventions.”

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Ishaan Tharoor writes about foreign affairs for The Washington Post. He previously was a senior editor at TIME, based first in Hong Kong and later in New York. [🐦 Follow @ishaantharoor](#)

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MIDDLE EAST | MEMO FROM IRAQ

ISIS' Harsh Brand of Islam Is Rooted in Austere Saudi Creed

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK SEPT. 24, 2014

BAGHDAD — Caliph Ibrahim, the leader of the Islamic State, appeared to come out of nowhere when he matter-of-factly proclaimed himself the ruler of all Muslims in the middle of an otherwise typical Ramadan sermon. Muslim scholars from the most moderate to the most militant all denounced him as a grandiose pretender, and the world gaped at his growing following and its vicious killings.

His ruthless creed, though, has clear roots in the 18th-century Arabian Peninsula. It was there that the Saud clan formed an alliance with the puritanical scholar Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab. And as they conquered the warring tribes of the desert, his austere interpretation of Islam became the foundation of the Saudi state.

Much to Saudi Arabia's embarrassment, the same thought has now been revived by the caliph, better known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as the foundation of the Islamic State.

"It is a kind of untamed Wahhabism," said Bernard Haykel, a scholar at Princeton. "Wahhabism is the closest religious cognate."

The Saudis and the rulers of other Persian Gulf states — all monarchies — are now united against the Islamic State, fearful that it might attack them from the outside or win followers within. Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have all participated with Washington in its attacks on the Islamic State's strongholds in Syria.

For their guiding principles, the leaders of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, are open and clear about their almost exclusive commitment to the Wahhabi movement of Sunni Islam. The group circulates images of Wahhabi religious textbooks from Saudi Arabia in the schools it controls. Videos from the group's territory have shown Wahhabi texts plastered on the sides of an official missionary van.

This approach is at odds with the more mainstream Islamist and jihadist thinking that forms the genealogy of Al Qaeda, and it has led to a fundamentally different view of violence. Al Qaeda grew out of a radical tradition that viewed Muslim states and societies as having fallen into sinful unbelief, and embraced violence as a tool to redeem them. But the Wahhabi tradition embraced the killing of those deemed unbelievers as essential to purifying the community of the faithful.

“Violence is part of their ideology,” Professor Haykel said. “For Al Qaeda, violence is a means to an ends; for ISIS, it is an end in itself.”

The distinction is playing out in a battle of fatwas. All of the most influential jihadist theorists are criticizing the Islamic State as deviant, calling its self-proclaimed caliphate null and void and, increasingly, slamming its leaders as bloodthirsty heretics for beheading journalists and aid workers.

The upstart polemicists of the Islamic State, however, counter that its critics and even the leaders of Al Qaeda are all bad Muslims who have gone soft on the West. Even the officials and fighters of the Palestinian militant group Hamas are deemed to be “unbelievers” who might deserve punishment with beheading for agreeing to a cease-fire with Israel, one Islamic State ideologue recently declared.

“The duty of a Muslim is to carry out all of God’s orders and rulings immediately on the spot, not softly and gradually,” the scholar, Al Turki Ben-Ali, 30, said in an online forum.

The Islamic State’s sensational propaganda and videos of beheadings appear to do double duty. In addition to threatening the West, its gory bravado draws applause online and elsewhere from sympathizers, which helps the group in the competition for new recruits.

That is especially important to the Islamic State because it requires a steady flow of recruits to feed its constant battles and heavy losses against multiple enemies — the governments of Iraq and Syria, Shiite and Kurdish fighters, rival Sunni militants and now the United States Air Force.

For Al Qaeda, meanwhile, disputes with the Islamic State are an opportunity “to reposition themselves as the more rational jihadists,” said Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, a researcher at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

The Islamic State’s founder, Mr. Baghdadi, grafted two elements onto his Wahhabi foundations borrowed from the broader, 20th-century Islamist movements that began with the Muslim Brotherhood and ultimately produced Al Qaeda. Where Wahhabi scholars preach obedience to earthly rulers, Mr. Baghdadi adopted the call to political action against foreign domination of the Arab world that has animated the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Qaeda and other 20th-century Islamist movements.

Mr. Baghdadi also borrowed the idea of a restored caliphate. Where Wahhabism first flourished alongside the Ottoman Caliphate, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded shortly after that caliphate’s dissolution, in 1924 — an event seen across the world as a marker of Western ascent and Eastern decline. The movement’s founders took up the call for a revived caliphate as a goal of its broader anti-Western project.

These days, though, even Brotherhood members appear almost embarrassed by the term’s anachronism, emphasizing that they use caliphate as a kind of spiritual idea irrelevant to the modern world of nation-states.

“Even for Al Qaeda, the caliphate was something that was going to happen in the far distant future, before the end times,” said William McCants, a researcher on militant Islam at the Brookings Institution. The Islamic State “really moved up the timetable,” he said — to June 2014, in fact.

Adhering to Wahhabi literalism, the Islamic State disdains other Islamists who reason by analogy to adapt to changing context — including the Muslim Brotherhood; its controversial midcentury thinker Sayed Qutb; and the contemporary militants his writing later inspired, like Ayman al-Zawahri of Al Qaeda. Islamic State ideologues often deem anyone, even an Islamist, who supports an elected or secular government to be an unbeliever and subject to beheading.

“This is ‘you join us, or you are against us and we finish you,’ ” said Prof. Emad Shahin, who teaches Islam and politics at Georgetown University. “It is not Al Qaeda, but far to its right.”

Some experts note that Saudi clerics lagged long after other Muslim scholars in formally denouncing the Islamic State, and at one point even the king publicly urged them to speak out more clearly. “There is a certain mutedness in the Saudi religious establishment, which indicates it is not a slam dunk to condemn ISIS,” Professor Haykel said.

Finally, on Aug. 19, Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh, the Saudi grand mufti, declared that “the ideas of extremism, radicalism and terrorism do not belong to Islam in any way, but are the first enemy of Islam, and Muslims are their first victims, as seen in the crimes of the so-called Islamic State and Al Qaeda.”

Al Qaeda’s ideologues have been more vehement. All insist that the promised caliphate requires a broad consensus, on behalf of Muslim scholars if not all Muslims, and not merely one man’s proclamation after a military victory.

“Will this caliphate be a sanctuary for all the oppressed and a refuge for every Muslim?” Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a senior jihadist scholar, recently asked in a statement on the Internet. “Or will this creation take a sword against all the Muslims who oppose it” and “nullify all the groups that do jihad in the name of God?”

Another prominent Qaeda-linked jihadist scholar, Abu Qatada al-Falastini, echoed that: “They are merciless in dealing with other jihadists. How would they deal with the poor, the weak and other people?”

Both scholars have recently been released from prison in Jordan, perhaps because the government wants to amplify their criticism of the Islamic State.

Omar Al-Jawoshy and Sarmad Chalabi contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on September 25, 2014, on page A14 of the New York edition with the headline: Extremist Group's Harsh Brand of Islam Has Roots in Austere Saudi Creed.

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LIFE | IDEAS | THE SATURDAY ESSAY

Jihad Comes to Africa

Boko Haram, al-Shabaab and other ruthless groups threaten to turn the continent into global jihad's deadliest front



A man holds a copy of the Quran at a protest against Niger President Mahamadou Issoufou's presence at a Paris rally after the Charlie Hebdo massacre, Niamey, Niger, in January 2015.

PHOTO: TAGAZA DJIBO/REUTERS

By YAROSLAV TROFIMOV

Feb. 5, 2016 12:23 p.m. ET

Africa's Muslim belt is getting bloodier.

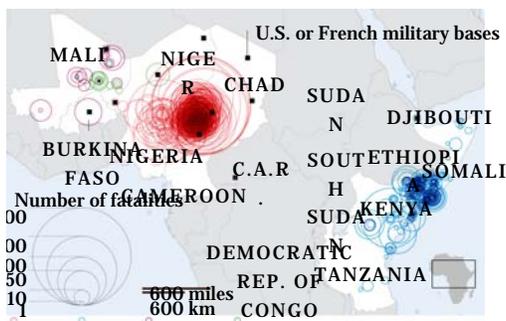
Boko Haram—the regional affiliate of Islamic State and one of the world's deadliest terrorist groups—has accelerated its campaign of almost daily suicide bombings. Just last month, the group massacred 86 people, many of them children, in the Nigerian village of Dalori and 32 others in the Cameroonian village of Bodo.

To the west, al Qaeda's regional franchise has been waging war on the government of Mali and expanded its reach last month to the previously peaceful country of Burkina Faso, slaying at least 30 people—many of them Westerners—in an assault on a luxury hotel. In the east, another al Qaeda affiliate, Somalia's al-Shabaab, overran an African Union military base three weeks ago and slaughtered more than 100 Kenyan troops.

Sub-Saharan Africa was long seen as relatively immune to the call of Islamist militancy because of its unorthodox religious practices—rooted in Sufism, a more mystical mode of Islam that focuses on individual spirituality—and its traditional cultures, which are far removed from strict Middle Eastern ways. Today the area has become the fastest-growing front of global jihad—and perhaps its deadliest.

Besieged Continent

Jihadist attacks in sub-Saharan Africa since 2013



Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

Driving this change is a crucial transformation of the way that Islam is being practiced by the 250 million Muslims living south of the Sahara—a population that is

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projected to grow by 60% over the next three decades. “The Islam that is spreading through society in Africa today is the new active Islam, not the dormant, Sufi, private-life only [version]. It’s going into policy, into economy, into culture, into education. It’s going into public life,” said Hassan al-Turabi, the leading ideologue of political Islam in Africa, who hosted Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders as Sudan’s de facto ruler in the 1990s.



Hassan al-Turabi, a leading Islamist ideologue, gives a speech in Khartoum, Sudan, 2014. PHOTO: MOHAMED NURELDIN ABDALLAH/REUTERS

Facing this challenge, the U.S. and other Western countries have increasingly chosen to prop up chronically weak African states that can’t handle the onslaught on their own. In 2013, France launched an outright military intervention to prevent a jihadist takeover of Mali, a former French colony, and Paris still maintains some 3,500 troops in Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Chad. Since then, the U.S. has established a drone base in Niger and is setting up another in Cameroon, in addition to sending special-operations forces to several countries in the region. The U.K. also has dispatched military personnel to help fight Boko Haram.

Africa is now crisscrossed by war zones stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic. Thus far, the rivalry between Islamic State and al Qaeda—Sunni terrorist groups that differ in their tactics and policies but have similar aims—has kept these insurgencies separate, but that may not last.

Meanwhile, the operations of these African militant groups have become increasingly sophisticated, often thanks to expertise and advice shared by their patrons and allies in the Middle East. Widespread Internet access and increasingly easy travel have made these connections far simpler than just a decade ago. The collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 and the subsequent takeover of several Libyan towns by affiliates of Islamic State and al Qaeda also provided a nearby redoubt of jihadist control and ambition.

Boko Haram—which roughly translates to “Western education is forbidden”—recently declared its allegiance to Islamic State and has put the new connection to use, Western and African officials say. The group has refined its propaganda videos, procured new weapons and improved its roadside-bombing techniques.



The aftermath of a deadly al Qaeda assault on the Splendid Hotel, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, Jan. 18. PHOTO: OUTER ELSEN/ EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

“To plan the kind of operations that Boko Haram carries out, you need people of proven intelligence. They must be receiving explosives specialists and strategists,” said Brig. Gen. Jacob Kodji, who commands Cameroonian forces battling Boko Haram in the country’s war-ravaged Far North region. “What they want is to create a caliphate and dominate a good part of Africa.”

Such aspirations have been fed by a social revolution sweeping many African countries, particularly in the impoverished Sahel region just south of the Sahara. As the continent’s weak, secular, postcolonial states have failed to deliver prosperity, basic services and good governance, their legitimacy has frayed—and their frustrated citizens have increasingly sought answers in Islam. In doing so, they often have abandoned the traditional religious establishment and adopted uncompromising ideologies imported from the Middle East, where a similar process began generations earlier.

“These people would say, ‘Your problems exist because you are led by the Western system, and as long as you don’t take the great Islamic way, these problems will remain.’ That’s a very simple and effective explanation, and it worked,” said Moussa Tchangari, who runs a human-rights group called Alternatives Espaces Citoyens in Niger, a Muslim country with the world’s highest birthrate and one of the lowest per capita incomes. “For a while, these people were a small minority,” Mr. Tchangari added, “but as we failed to create a real democracy and resolve social problems, they advanced—and now they have succeeded in imposing themselves.”

In Niger and many neighboring countries, the pace of this form of Islamization has been dizzying. Issoufou Yahaya, a historian from Niger, says that when he studied at the University of Niamey in the late 1980s, there wasn’t a single mosque on the campus, which sprawls along the emerald-green southern bank of the Niger River. “Today, we have more mosques here than we have lecture rooms,” said Dr. Yahaya, who now heads the university’s history department. “So much has changed in such a short time.”

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- The New Jihad (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/why-the-new-jihadists-in-iraq-and-syria-see-al-qaeda-as-too-passive-1405096590>) (July 11, 2014)

Just outside his office towers a concrete monument featuring the intertwined flags of Niger and Saudi Arabia, the ultraconservative kingdom whose oil-funded missionary campaign has helped to spread Sunni religious zeal throughout Africa. At the university's main mosque, Friday sermons by Sheikh Boureima Abdou Daouda, who is also chairman of the League of Islamic Scholars and Preachers of the Countries of the Sahel, attract tens of thousands of worshipers.

"Before, people here turned to religion when they reached middle age, and particularly after they retired. But now, it is above all the young ones," said Sheikh Boureima, who spends much of his time spreading his religious message through Twitter and Facebook. "What we see is a flourishing of Islam."



A young fighter from the Islamist group Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, Gao, Mali, July 17, 2012. PHOTO: ISSOUF SANOGO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The surprising degree of Islamization in Niger, which officially remains a secular republic, burst into the open a year ago, after the deadly jihadist attack in Paris on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. Niger's president, Mahamadou Issoufou, who is close to French President François Hollande, swiftly jetted to Paris to walk alongside other world leaders in a huge street march against violent extremism.

But back home in Niger, many saw Mr. Issoufou's visit as an endorsement of Charlie Hebdo's allegedly blasphemous cartoons about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. Furious crowds gathered in the capital, Niamey, and in provincial cities, torching more than 40 churches and the French cultural center. At least 10 people died in the rioting, which lasted days and deeply unsettled the country's Christian minority.

Of course, Islam—and even Islamic radicalism—aren't new to sub-Saharan Africa. Medieval kingdoms in present-day Mali and Nigeria converted to the faith many centuries ago. In the 19th century, Muslim leaders in these regions and in Sudan declared jihads against both infidels and Muslim rulers whom they considered insufficiently pious. At the same time, Muslim slave traders established outposts all the way south to the Congo. Roughly a third of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is Muslim today.

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- Russia's Long Road to the Middle East (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-long-road-to-the-middle-east-1464361067>) May 27, 2016

Only the arrival of European colonialists—and Christian missionaries—stopped Islam's southward march. That created a Muslim-Christian religious divide that still dominates the politics of many African countries, such as Nigeria and Ivory Coast, and led to the 2011 breakup of Sudan.

With few exceptions, however, African Islam remained traditionally Sufi and uninvolved in politics. Sufi orders such as the Tijaniya and the Qadiriya, which are still powerful in many African countries, accommodated some elements of pre-Islamic African beliefs, adapting their practices to the region's multiethnic and multireligious societies. In these orders, religious leadership in local communities is often held by hereditary Muslim teachers and holy men known as marabouts, who are sometimes believed to hold magical powers and whose tombs are venerated.

In the era of European empires and the first decades of postcolonial independence, such syncretic practices remained largely unaffected by the political and religious changes sweeping the Middle East. But after the global rise of political Islam that followed the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Africa became increasingly connected to the broader Muslim world—and Africa's Sufi traditions came under attack.

Though Shiite Iran has made some inroads, particularly in Nigeria, with conversions to its minority sect of Islam, the charge in Africa has been led by Saudi Arabia's ultraconservative Sunni religious establishment. Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, the puritanical 18th-century preacher whose teachings remain the foundation of the Saudi state, deemed Sufis heretics and ordered the razing of their graves and shrines. For Saudi clerics, eliminating such heretical "innovations" and returning to the pure, strict Islam practiced by the Prophet Muhammad became the focus of world-wide religious outreach.

The arrival of modern communications accelerated this trend, bringing Africa's once-isolated Muslim communities into the turmoil sweeping the broader Islamic world—and undermining the power of traditional clergy who had preached accommodation with governments and non-Muslims. "Internet and mobile telephony have turned the slow drip into a fire hose," said J. Peter Pham, director of the Africa Center at the Atlantic Council, a think tank in Washington, D.C. "A lot of West African Islam was based on practices that were not typical in Orthodox Sunni Islam, on ritual rather than learning and scholarship. But in a world where anyone can look up theology on the Internet, it is no longer credible."

Proselytizing efforts by Saudi charities—and, to a lesser extent, by institutions from Qatar and Turkey—also have flooded Africa with money. Thousands of African theology students have been trained in the Middle East in recent decades, particularly at Saudi Arabia's Islamic University of Medina, often to return as teachers or imams at the lavish new mosques that the Saudi kingdom has built across the continent.

"What they brought back is an Islam that doesn't take into account the realities of our countries," said Ali Abdel-Rhamane Hagggar, the rector of the University of N'Djamena in Chad and a former adviser to the country's president. "But it's easy to recruit amid the poverty, and the Wahhabis are very rich." Thanks to their superior knowledge of religious texts and mastery of Arabic, many of these graduates also have competed successfully with traditional Sufi clerics, who often have only rudimentary schooling.

"The traditional imams have always been seen as men of the system, preaching patience and not struggle. As the system is not working, more people are getting closer to those who contest rather than those who legitimize what is going on," said Mr. Tchangari, the human-rights activist in Niger.

Perhaps the strongest such Saudi-inspired revivalist movement in Africa is the Izala Society (formally known as the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Re-establishment of the Sunnah), which sprang up in northern Nigeria in the late 1970s to campaign against Sufi practices. It has since gained ground in several neighboring countries.

A leading Izala-influenced sheik was Ja'afar Adam, a graduate of the Islamic University of Medina who presided over a popular mosque in the Nigerian city of Kano. One of his favorite pupils was Mohammed Yusuf, the preacher who would go on to establish today's Boko Haram. Yusuf, who repeatedly traveled to Saudi Arabia, quickly became much more radical, seeking to destroy rather than to change existing African states such as Nigeria and rejecting any Western influence in the Muslim world. In 2007, after Adam publicly condemned his former student, Yusuf ordered the scholar's assassination. Having spawned Boko Haram, the Izala Society has become one of its main targets, and several prominent Saudi-backed clerics have been gunned down since then.

"It's one of the unintended consequences. People adopt the Saudi ideology and internalize it, and then they realize that Saudi Arabia itself is not living up to that ideology, and so it becomes their enemy," said Jacob Zenn, a specialist on Nigeria and African security at the Jamestown Foundation.

Yusuf was killed in Nigerian police custody in 2009. Under his even more radical successor, Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram formally became the "West Africa Province" of Islamic State last year, abandoning some of its more idiosyncratic ideas and embracing the ideology of Islamic State's self-styled caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.



Al-Shabaab gunmen patrol a market in Mogadishu, Somalia, June 2009. PHOTO: MUSTAFA ABDI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Boko Haram has devastated large parts of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger, launching attacks that sometimes have involved up to a thousand militants, as well as tanks stolen from Nigerian armories. At least 17,000 people have died in the continuing conflict, and 2.6 million have been uprooted from their homes. Lately, Boko Haram's favorite tactic has become sending suicide bombers—often children—to kill and maim worshippers at Sufi mosques.

“These people think that all the Muslim communities that aren't like them are unbelievers. This is how they brainwash those children,” said Sheikh Abdadayim Abdoulaye Ousman, a Sufi cleric who oversees Chad's Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs. “For these extremists, the goal is power, not religion.”

Even Mr. Turabi, now a Sudanese opposition politician, says that he is perturbed by how violent the African Islamist awakening that he championed for decades has become, especially in the case of Boko Haram. “It's a revival, but when they are faced with a challenge, they become very active, even overactive,” Mr. Turabi said. “They want to hit, to struggle and destroy—but they do not know how to build anything.”

Write to Yaroslav Trofimov at yaroslav.trofimov@wsj.com

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SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Terrorists the Saudis Cultivate in Peaceful Countries

Nicholas Kristof JULY 2, 2016

PEJA, Kosovo — FIRST, a three-part quiz:

Which Islamic country celebrates as a national hero a 15th-century Christian who battled Muslim invaders?

Which Islamic country is so pro-American it has a statue of Bill Clinton and a women's clothing store named "Hillary" on Bill Clinton Boulevard?

Which Islamic country has had more citizens go abroad to fight for the Islamic State per capita than any other in Europe?

The answer to each question is Kosovo, in southeastern Europe — and therein lies a cautionary tale. Whenever there is a terrorist attack by Muslim extremists, we look to our enemies like the Islamic State or Al Qaeda. But perhaps we should also look to our "friends," like Saudi Arabia.

For decades, Saudi Arabia has recklessly financed and promoted a harsh and intolerant Wahhabi version of Islam around the world in a way that is, quite

predictably, producing terrorists. And there's no better example of this Saudi recklessness than in the Balkans.

Kosovo and Albania have been models of religious moderation and tolerance, and as the Clinton statue attests, Kosovars revere the United States and Britain for averting a possible genocide by Serbs in 1999 (there are also many Kosovar teenagers named Tony Blair!). Yet Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries poured money into the new nation over the last 17 years and nurtured religious extremism in a land where originally there was little.

The upshot is that, according to the Kosovo government, 300 Kosovars have traveled to fight in Syria or Iraq, mostly to join the Islamic State. As my colleague Carlotta Gall noted in a pathbreaking article about radicalization here, Saudi money has transformed a once-tolerant Islamic society into a pipeline for jihadists.

In a sign of the times, the government last year had to turn off the water supply in the capital temporarily amid fears of an Islamic State-inspired plot to poison the city's water.

"Saudi Arabia is destroying Islam," Zuhdi Hajzeri, an imam at a 430-year-old mosque here in the city of Peja, told me sadly. Hajzeri is a moderate in the traditional, tolerant style of Kosovo — he is the latest in a long line of imams in his family — and said that as a result he had received more death threats from extremists than he can count.

Hajzeri and other moderates have responded with a website, **Foltash.com**, that criticizes the harsh Saudi Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. But they say they are outgunned by money pouring in from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain to support harsh variants of Islam through a blizzard of publications, videos and other materials.

"The Saudis completely changed Islam here with their money," said Visar Duriqi, a former imam in Kosovo who became a journalist who writes about extremist influences. Duriqi cites himself as an example: He says he was brainwashed and underwent an extremist phase in which he called for imposing Shariah law and excusing violence. Those views now horrify him.

This is not a Kosovo problem, but a global problem. I first encountered pernicious Saudi influence in Pakistan, where the public school system is a disgrace and Saudis filled the gap by financing hard-line madrasas that lure students with free tuition, free meals and full scholarships for overseas study for the best students.

Likewise, in traditionally moderate, peaceful countries like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in West Africa, I've seen these foreign-financed madrasas introduce radical interpretations of Islam. In the Balkans, Bosnia is particularly affected by Gulf support for extremists.

I don't want to exaggerate. I saw fewer head scarves on my trip through Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania than I do in New York City, and any jihadist would tear his hair out at seeing women with bare heads and shoulders, not to mention shorts.

There are still pillars of pro-American feeling and ecumenism (there is great reverence among Albanian Muslims for Mother Teresa, who was Albanian). Moreover, after a series of arrests of radical imams in Kosovo and Albania, the situation may have stabilized, and jihadists no longer seem to be traveling to Syria from here.

But the world needs to have tough conversations with Saudi Arabia about its role. It's not that it is intentionally spreading havoc, more that it is behaving recklessly; it has made some painstaking progress in curbing extremist financing, but too slowly.

It's particularly dispiriting because much of the extremist funding seems to come from charity: One of the most admirable aspects of Islam is its emphasis on charity, yet in countries like Saudi Arabia this money is directed not to fight malnutrition or child mortality, but to brainwash children and sow conflict in poor and unstable countries.

I asked Hajzeri, the imam, whether he was worried by foreign threats to Islam, like the Danish cartoonist who mocked the Prophet Muhammad. "Cartoonists can just hurt our feelings," he snorted. "But damaging the reputation of Islam? That's not what the cartoonists are doing. That's what Saudi Arabia is doing."

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on July 3, 2016, on page SR9 of the New York edition with the headline: The Terror the Saudis Foment.

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