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The Joint US-Saudi Guilt for 9/11

By Daniel Lazare

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In a stunning repudiation of Barack Obama’s Middle East policies, Congress has overridden a presidential veto and confirmed that 9/11 survivors can sue Saudi Arabia for its role in the destruction of the World Trade Center.

The vote was a rare victory in a global political system in which the major powers routinely roll over ordinary civilians the way a tank rolls over a daisy. Whether it’s a Yemeni wedding party pulverized by an errant bomb or a terrified office worker plummeting through space to escape the fire on 9/11, these are the sorts of people whom drone operators call “bug splats,” individuals whose bloody remnants must be wiped away as quickly as possible so that the war machine can continue on its way. But now it looks like some of their surviving families may finally get their day in court.

As wonderful as this is, there’s a problem. JASTA, as the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act is universally known, goes after the wrong people. Yes, Saudi hands are all over 9/11. As the inestimable Kristen Breitweiser has pointed out the long-suppressed 28-page chapter (actually 29) of the Joint Congressional Report dealing with the Saudi role in 9/11 was a bombshell no matter how Washington and Riyadh try to deny it.

It described one link after another between Saudi officials and the 19 hijackers, 15 of them Saudi subjects. It notes, for instance, that the FBI received “numerous reports from individuals in the Muslim community” that Omar al-Bayoumi, a Saudi national who helped two of the hijackers after they arrived in the U.S., was a Saudi intelligence officer.

It says that Osama Bassnan, whom it describes as a supporter of Osama bin Laden, may have “received funding and possibly a fake passport from Saudi Government officials”; that he and his wife may also have received financial support from Saudi Ambassador Bandar bin Sultan, and that he received “a significant amount of cash” from another member of the royal family as well.

The report cites FBI documents saying that a phone book owned by Abu Zubaida, a senior Al Qaeda operative captured in Pakistan, contained the unlisted number of the company that manages Bin Sultan’s vacation home in Aspen, Colorado.

Such links are remarkable, and if JASTA enables 9/11 survivors to pursue them further, then it’s all to the good. Still, the legislation overlooks one all-important fact: 9/11 in the final analysis was less a Saudi job than an American one.

This doesn’t mean that the CIA wired the Twin Towers with explosives or that Mossad somehow engineered the hijacking. What it means, rather, is that Washington has shaped the U.S.-Saudi relationship from the start and that it therefore must take responsibility for the horrors that have followed.

Made in the USA

The degree to which Saudi Arabia was made in the USA is often overlooked. But before the United States happened on the scene in the early 1930s, the kingdom was a great empty zone consisting of goats, flies, sand dunes, and a few thousand fanatical jihadis whom the British had no trouble taking care of when they threatened their holdings in neighboring Iraq and Jordan.

King Ibn Saud, whose stronghold was a desolate plateau known as Najd, was himself virtually a U.K. prisoner. Indeed, this is why he brought in American geologists when it appeared that significant oil deposits might lie beneath his country’s shifting sands. An alliance with the U.S. was his only hope of getting out from under Britain’s thumb.

Ibn Saud was a wily operator who eventually figured out how to use his oil wealth to gain leverage over U.S. oil companies as well. But leverage doesn’t mean independence. To the contrary, it meant a deepening partnership with the U.S. that the Americans encouraged at every turn.

So durable was the relationship that events that should have torn it apart only made it stronger. The most obvious is the 1973 Yom Kippur War when America’s pro-Israel policies led the Saudis to impose an oil embargo that quickly brought capitalism to its knees. Although President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger briefly considered seizing Saudi oil fields in retaliation, they eventually opted for an opposite policy based on ever closer economic integration.

With oil prices jumping six-fold in real terms by 1980, Saudi Arabia blossomed into an economic powerhouse, a mass consumer of everything from oil equipment to refrigerators, air conditioners, and cars. American anger soon dissipated. The country was the new El Dorado.

The Iranian Revolution in February 1979 might also have undermined the budding new relationship by sending a clear message that the Persian Gulf was deeply unstable and that the U.S. would be foolish to grow overly reliant on energy from such a dangerous source. The same goes for the seizure of Mecca's Grand Mosque by ultra-Wahhabist militants the following November. It also highlighted the political fault lines coursing through the region, which might also have caused the U.S. to back off.

But instead, the U.S. responded by embracing the Saudis ever more tightly. Although Jimmy Carter and his national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski had already begun sponsoring an Islamic fundamentalist revolt in Afghanistan, the Soviet incursion that followed in late December 1979 sealed the deal on what was to become one of the most durable marriages in modern diplomatic history.

Soon, under President Ronald Reagan, the U.S. and Saudis would be partners not only in fomenting Afghan jihad, but in other ventures as well such as channeling funds to the Nicaraguan Contras or to the South African-backed guerrilla leader Jonas Savimbi in Angola.

This was an age of off-shoring when Wall Street moved its financial operations overseas in order to escape the Securities and Exchange Commission. The Reagan administration did the same with covert operations in order to escape an increasingly intrusive Congress.

But just as one shouldn't blame the Cayman Islands for the consequences, one shouldn't blame the Saudis either. To be sure, the latter reaped enormous benefits in the form of economic and military security, not to mention trillions in oil revenue. But the U.S. benefited even more.

Bleeding the Soviets

Not only did Saudi-fueled jihad bleed the Soviets dry in Afghanistan, but the U.S. and Saudi Arabia acquired sufficient leverage to manipulate the energy markets to Soviet disadvantage. U.S. control should not be exaggerated; America was having as hard a time as everyone else maintaining its balance amid economic turbulence of the day.

But the combination of steep price hikes in the 1970s and an equally dizzying plunge in the 1980s had the effect of first encouraging Russia's dependence on international oil revenues and then slamming it to the ground when those revenues suddenly vanished. It was a one-two punch from which the Soviet economy never recovered.

Combined with the punishing war in Afghanistan, the results soon proved fatal. When the *Nouvel Observateur* caught up with Brzezinski in 1998 and asked him if he regretted stirring up Islamic fundamentalism, he shot back:

“Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap, and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War. Indeed, for almost ten years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupported by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet Empire....

“What is more important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?”

And, for these American global chess players, the benefits kept on coming. The Saudis also helped the U.S. roll back leftwing influence across the Third World and then deal Iraq’s Saddam Hussein a punishing blow in the 1990-91 Gulf War, an awesome military display that doubled as a shot over the bow of neighboring Iran.

Riyadh sent mujahedeen to Bosnia where the U.S. was anxious to reduce Russian influence and to Chechnya where the threat to Russian interests was even more direct.

But then the relationship unraveled when Osama bin Laden began striking at Western targets, most notably U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya where more than 200 people died in simultaneous bombings in August 1998 and then the USS Cole in October 2000. The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon 11 months later was of course the final straw.

An Enduring Bond

So why didn’t the U.S. cut its losses by severing the Saudi partnership? Didn’t it realize that the costs were beginning to outweigh the benefits? The reason is that it knew that it was complicit in the Saudi terror campaign and that the Saudis knew it too. The two countries were in it together. Both had shown staggering recklessness and duplicity in their dealings with Al Qaeda, and both therefore had too much to lose in the event of a mutual falling out.

The George W. Bush administration, moreover, was especially vulnerable. After the stolen election of 2000, Republicans knew that they faced mass destruction at the polls in 2004 if the full news about Bush’s incompetence got out. So a cover-up was even more essential for Washington than it was for Riyadh.

This is why Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld began pushing for an invasion of Iraq the morning after the Twin Towers attack. Although all evidence pointed to the Saudis, he wanted to deflect attention from Riyadh and place it on Baghdad instead. The same goes for Vice President Dick Cheney who, as Breitweiser notes, opposed a special investigation into 9/11 on the grounds that it would somehow interfere with efforts to ward off incidents that were undoubtedly on the way.

As Cheney put it in May 2002: “An investigation must not interfere with the ongoing efforts to prevent the next attack, because without a doubt a very real threat of another perhaps more

devastating attack still exists. The people and agencies responsible for helping us learn about and defeat such an attack are the very ones most likely to be distracted from their critical duties if Congress fails to carry out their obligations in a responsible fashion.”

An investigation into 9/11 would divert attention from the more immediate task of taking out Iraq. Yet the reality was quite the other way around. Taking out Iraq would divert attention from an investigation into 9/11. The 2003 invasion can thus be seen as a vast diversionary effort.

Its goal was to deflect attention from the real culprits, which is to say the U.S. and its Saudi partners, and shift it onto a country, Iraq, that, as former counter-terrorism czar Richard A. Clarke would later complain, had no more to do with 9/11 than Mexico did with Pearl Harbor. It was an exercise in mass deception that ended up costing an estimated \$3 trillion and perhaps half a million lives.

To the degree that JASTA will help shift attention back to the Saudis, it is welcome. But if it takes aim at only one party in this grotesque pas-de-deux, and the less guilty one at that, then it could actually end up compounding the cover-up.

With oil down to \$50 a barrel or so, Congress figures that the U.S. no longer has much need of Saudi Arabia and can therefore kick it while it's down. Voting to allow the survivors' lawsuit to go forward meant allowing it to take the fall, which is why it passed so overwhelmingly. But Riyadh should not accept the outcome without protest. Rather, it should do everything it can to take Washington down with it.