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"We Support Some, They Support Some"

When Reagan took office in January 1981 he inherited from Carter a number of nascent covert operations. Along with his director of central intelligence, Bill Casey, Reagan aggressively sought to bolster them.

Casey urged the NSC and State Department to explore third-party funding when domestic restrictions threatened ongoing operations. In almost all cases, the Reagan administration turned to Saudi Arabia to help overcome financial shortfalls. Hints were dropped and suggestions made about areas of particular concern. As Ambassador Robert G. Neumann characterized it, Saudi Arabia financed "all sorts of operations all over the world. . . . We support some, they support some . . . we talk about it . . . but it's an individual decision."¹

After a decade of détente, a policy Saudi Arabia never supported, King Fahd welcomed Reagan's determination to confront Soviet pressure more directly. Riyadh appreciated Reagan's refocus on the "periphery," an area that included Saudi Arabia's backyard. Unlike during earlier periods of American third-world activity, this time Saudi Arabia had something to offer—money. Riyadh began pouring it in, often anticipating Reagan's preferred projects. Saudi resources were particularly attractive in places such as Nicaragua, where Congress was systematically reducing financing for policies near and dear to the president's heart. In Afghanistan, Angola, the horn of Africa, and elsewhere, Saudi Arabia's contributions helped the Reagan administration aid and abet anti-Communist activities on a worldwide scale.

Giving the Soviets Their Vietnam

The Reagan administration viewed Russia's entanglement in Afghanistan with nervous enthusiasm. With nearly a hundred thousand Soviet soldiers occupying the country, Afghanistan offered Washington the opportunity to directly confront Soviet troops. Elsewhere, in places such as in Ethiopia and Angola, the Soviets and Americans confronted each other through proxies. Casey told his deputy director of operations, John N. McMahon, that a policy of harassing the Russians in Afghanistan was not only something Reagan would likely continue, but something he would probably intensify.²

King Fahd was receptive to America's determination to increase the pressure on the Soviets in Afghanistan, as was Turki al-Faisal. Bearing a striking resemblance to his father, the late King Faisal, Turki would become the point man for U.S.-Saudi relations in Afghanistan, and the CIA's key liaison in the kingdom. Two decades later, he would become Saudi Arabia's new ambassador to the United States. Turki easily operated in the secretive world of intelligence. Mentored in his youth by Kamal Adham, Turki replaced his uncle as the director of the General Intelligence Department in 1977. The CIA and other American officials identified Turki as perhaps the most reliable individual in the Saudi government. He also developed close ties with Osama bin Laden and other fighters in Afghanistan. His hatred for Communism, in addition to his facility with colloquial English, made him a natural interlocutor with the United States. On Afghanistan, he was "the man to see."³ Today, in Turki's modest home in Jeddah, below a portrait of his father, stands a plaque memorializing the late King Faisal. It is inscribed in Arabic and recalls the final words of Afghanistan's King Abdul Rahman Khan on his deathbed in 1901:

My heart remains in Afghanistan, although my soul is moving towards God. My last words to you my son and my successor: Do not trust the Russians, and never have any confidence in them.

Anti-Communist endeavors occupied a considerable portion of Prince Turki's activity, and he received King Fahd's backing to fund efforts to roll back Soviet aggression.

In addition to fighting Communism, the Saudi leadership sought to combat expanding Iranian influence in Afghanistan. Ten to 15 percent of the Afghan population is Shi'a, although local claims put the number somewhat higher. Most are Hazara, a Persian-speaking ethnic group, and many of those have ties with Iran. During the 1970s tens of thousands of Hazara went to Iran as day laborers. Located mostly in

the central part of Afghanistan, many Afghan Shi'a were inspired by the Iranian revolution and ultimately received assistance from Tehran. Already aiding Iraq to stop Iran's western expansion, Saudi Arabia supported Afghanistan's most radical Sunni groups to halt Iran's eastern drift. According to Olivier Roy, a French expert on political Islam and Afghanistan, the Saudis linked up in Afghanistan with the Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan's Jama'at-i-Islami to: promote the more radical Islamist parties among the Afghan fighters (also known as mujahideen), check Iranian influence, and prevent Western cultural influences from spreading among refugees and the mujahideen. Writes Roy, "the first two objectives had the full support of the Pakistani ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence] and the CIA."⁴

The Afghan war would dramatically alter Saudi society by bringing to the surface and encouraging the most ascetic and fundamentalist religious interpretation. Whereas King Faisal had laid the foundations of Saudi Arabia's global religious influence but tried to temper the excesses of Wahhabi purists within society, King Fahd unleashed them for political ends. Occurring against the backdrop of the Iranian revolution, the seizure of the Grand Mosque of Mecca, and Shi'a rioting in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, Afghanistan provided Fahd an opportunity to mobilize domestic support along religious grounds—no small task for a king with a well-known appetite for drinking and womanizing. During the 1980s, flyers, pamphlets, and propaganda proliferated, all urging young Saudis to fight the jihad in Afghanistan. Clerics in the mosques and teachers in the schools did the same. By 1986 more than sixteen thousand of the kingdom's one hundred thousand students were pursuing Islamic studies. By the early 1990s one-fourth of all university students were enrolled in religious institutions.⁵ The most violent and radical messages were not only tolerated but often encouraged at the highest levels. Saudi Arabia's grand mufti, Sheikh Abdel Aziz bin Baz, and the governor of Riyadh, Prince Salman, a son of King Abdel Aziz, organized the official and charitable funds flowing toward Afghanistan. In the words of one now reformed Saudi ideologue, during the 1980s "society was given an overdose of religion."⁶

Over the course of the decade, Saudi Arabia developed a robust system for recruiting Saudi fighters, one that was left in place after the war ended and contributed to the Saudi militant presence in places such as Bosnia during the 1990s. "I felt as if I had missed Afghanistan because I was too young," remembered one prospective fighter in Riyadh who came of age during the early 1990s. "It made me want to sign up to go to Bosnia. In the end I didn't, but my friend did, and he was killed there."⁷

Three months into his new job, Casey flew to Pakistan and then Saudi Arabia. This trip was repeated annually, according to the CIA division chief at the time, "to ensure that both were still interested [in] and supportive of the Afghan program."⁸ Pakistan's president, Zia ul-Haq, who had been aiding the Afghan resistance from the beginning, was eager to continue the fight in Afghanistan. Accordingly, Zia gave Casey his "red triangle briefing"—so named because of a red triangle he laid atop a map of the region. Zia positioned the point of the triangle in Afghanistan and the base across the Persian Gulf. It effectively illustrated Zia's concern that the Soviets intended to drive a wedge between Iran and Pakistan and then push south to secure their historic ambition of a warm-water port. If this was achieved, the Soviets would significantly influence oil transit from the Persian Gulf. After Pakistan, Casey then traveled to Saudi Arabia to solicit funding, a trip he would repeat many times over the next several years.

Congress supported Casey's efforts in Afghanistan. From 1982 to 1983 combined military and economic aid to Pakistan, the main conduit to Afghanistan, increased fourfold, from \$101 million to \$461 million.⁹ Unlike in Nicaragua, where Congress relentlessly restricted aid and reduced the CIA's ability to act, in Afghanistan Congress pushed to expand operations. Determined legislators such as Representatives Charles N. Wilson (D-Tex.) and I. William McCollum Jr. (R-Fla.) and Senators Gordon J. Humphrey (R-N.H.) and Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah) fought to increase both the program's size and budget. Congressman Wilson urged his Democratic counterparts to support the Afghan cause in order to demonstrate to their constituents back home their real anti-Communist credentials while still opposing the administration's Latin American policies.¹⁰ Early in the 1980s the goal in Afghanistan was to stop rather than roll back Soviet advancement. As Zia ul-Haq said in December 1979, "The water in Afghanistan must boil at the right temperature."¹¹ Such moderation would change dramatically in 1985 when the United States decided to make an all-out attempt to eject Soviet forces from, and thus win in, Afghanistan. In 1985 the Afghan program received over 50 percent of the CIA's entire operations budget.¹²

Early on, however, America wanted to maintain the shill of "plausible deniability." The CIA scoured the globe for Soviet weaponry to supply the mujahideen, those fighting against the Soviet aggression. Soviet weaponry would help hide America's hand. It would also allow the mujahideen to integrate more easily captured Soviet weapons and ammunition.

With its inventories full of aging Soviet equipment, Egypt eagerly joined the U.S.-Saudi-Pakistani joint venture. Very early on, the Saudis

and Americans offered Egypt "very generous" terms for supplying Afghan fighters.¹³ Providing weaponry and ordinance to Afghanistan provided Cairo hard currency it desperately needed after Saudi Arabia and the other Arabs cut off support in response to the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement. Afghanistan also offered Egypt the opportunity to work its way back into Saudi Arabia's good graces after being ostracized. In this Cairo was largely successful.

Some forty anti-Soviet guerrilla groups existed inside and around Afghanistan and appeared too fractured to pose any significant threat to Soviet influence. Accordingly, Prince Turki took many trips to Pakistan, the country that maintained the closest relations with the mujahideen, to urge better Afghan organization. According to a U.S. intelligence summary report, Saudi Arabia was particularly skeptical about the prospects of the resistance, having been disappointed in supporting rebels against leftists in Yemen and elsewhere. Saudi officials repeatedly insisted on unity among Islamic parties as a condition for giving or expanding aid.¹⁴

In 1982 Pakistan, with Saudi urging, successfully organized the Afghan resistance into six parties: three Islamic fundamentalist parties, led by Yunis Khalis, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Burhanuddin Rabbani, and three more-moderate parties, led by Maulvi Mohammed Nabi Mohammadi, Syed Ahmed Gailani, and Sibghatullah Mojadedi. A seventh party, headed by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, was later formed under pressure from Saudi Arabia. Sayyaf, swashbuckling and unrelentingly doctrinaire, was born in Pahman, Afghanistan, around 1944. He earned a master's degree from al-Azhar University in Cairo and returned to Kabul University, where he became active in the burgeoning Islamic movement. He was one of the two most educated Afghan warlords. After Afghanistan's 1973 coup he was imprisoned, and fled to Pakistan in 1979 upon his release. Around that time he was recruited by Saudi Arabia and founded the *Ittehad-i-Islami* party, a fundamentalist party devoted to spreading a militant interpretation of Islam. Osama bin Laden joined Sayyaf when bin Laden came to Afghanistan for jihad. Today, Sayyaf's followers fill key posts in the Afghan government, including the influential position of chief justice.

Sayyaf had virtually no indigenous Afghan support, but he, along with the virulently anti-American Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who in his youth had thrown acid on the faces of unveiled women, received the largest amount of outside Arab funding, in large part because of their radical and religiously puritanical beliefs. During the Afghan war, Hekmatyar received 50 percent of the arms flowing through Pakistan's

intelligence services, paid for largely by American and Saudi funds. For both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Sayyaf and Hekmatyar were appealing figures, as both were Pashtun, rather than Tajik, a Persian-speaking ethnic group. They were thus believed to be less susceptible to Iranian influence.¹⁵ Sayyaf's organization absorbed most of the non-Afghan Arab fighters.

All seven of the warlords were anti-American to a greater or lesser degree, with Hekmatyar the most strident. After the 2001 war in Afghanistan, the United States tried twice to kill him after it became apparent he was organizing against the United States.

In February 1984 Zia urged Casey to increase U.S. financial assistance. Casey then traveled to Saudi Arabia, where his hosts agreed to raise their contribution from \$75 million to \$100 million in fiscal year 1985. Upon returning home, Casey and his supporters in Congress were able to increase U.S. support by a similar amount.

The U.S.-Saudi matching program, put in place by Brzezinski in 1979, was still active. For every dollar raised for Afghanistan in the United States, Saudi Arabia agreed to contribute a similar amount.

By late 1984 the United States would increase its support to \$250 million. Saudi Arabia matched it.¹⁶ In mid-1986 U.S. assistance again jumped to \$600 million. Between 1981 and 1986 U.S. and Saudi bilateral aid grew tenfold, from a combined \$120 million to \$1.2 billion per year. The money went to weapons and to the ISI for distribution to the foreign fighters in the manner of Pakistan's choosing.

The CIA was happy to receive Saudi funds that required "literally, no oversight." Saudi officials never asked for an accounting of the money once it was deposited. The head of the CIA's Afghan Task Force remembers that we "never got a call from the Saudis asking about where things were going, or what we were doing. There was no attempt to manage the account—unlike Congress, and the Pakistanis."¹⁷ The pernicious effects of such whimsical Saudi accounting practices would explode two decades later in debates around Saudi Arabia's role in terrorist financing.

The CIA used the cash to purchase weapons for Afghan fighters. Each month the CIA also transferred funds to ISI-controlled bank accounts to facilitate logistics and support. In addition to Saudi Arabia's official matching of America's dollar-for-dollar contributions, a second, more amorphous funding stream operated through religious institutions and privately funded charities inside the kingdom. Such funds entered Afghanistan in addition to official funding. As the Pakistani general running the operation later recalled:

It was largely Arab money that saved the system. By this I mean cash from rich individuals or private organizations in the Arab world, not Saudi government funds . . . it all went to the four Fundamentalist parties. . . . Sayyaf, in particular, had many personal religious or academic contacts in Saudi Arabia, so his coffers were usually kept well filled. This meant the moderates became proportionately less efficient, lack of Arab money being one of the causes of their inability to match the Fundamentalists in operational effectiveness.¹⁸

The fact that the ISI also preferred these fundamentalist parties further enhanced their status.

Saudi Arabia's grand mufti, Abdel Aziz bin Baz, a blind cleric with considerable domestic support and legitimacy who ran the World Muslim League (the organization created under King Faisal in his quest for "Islamic solidarity"), used that organization to raise money for Afghanistan. In 1981 bin Baz reportedly transferred \$25 million to Sayyaf to start a new party in Afghanistan.¹⁹ Prince Salman helped to recruit fighters destined for Sayyaf's group through such institutions, blurring the line between government and nongovernment sponsorship.

According to one of Sayyaf's Afghan associates, "Sayyaf raises millions of dollars from businessmen and charities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates."²⁰ By the end of the war, such aid amounted to between \$20 million and \$25 million per month. The money helped ensure that Sayyaf's fighters had generators to keep them warm and that they were outfitted in "lavish equipment and camouflage fatigues."²¹ It also built the foundation for al-Qaeda.

Over time it became ever harder to distinguish between money earmarked for Sayyaf and money intended for the larger mujahideen effort. For example, in 1984 the BBC reported that "the Saudi ambassador to Pakistan, Tawfiq al-Alamadar . . . delivered a check for \$10,000,000 to Prof. Abdorrasul Sayyaf."²² It was never clear whether this was delivered to Sayyaf in his capacity as a liaison to the wider mujahideen movement or as leader of the Ittehad-i-Islami party. Privately, Afghan intellectuals expressed their worries that Arabs, and especially Saudis, were using their aid to gain religious influence in Afghanistan.²³ Their fears were realized less than a decade later.

The Muslim Brotherhood also raised money for the Afghan fighters. The Brotherhood's efforts were led by a Palestinian Jordanian, Abdullah Azzam, who had close links with both Sayyaf and Hekmatyar. Azzam headed the Maktab al-Khidmat (Services Center), a center established in Peshawar in 1984 to support the Arab recruits heading to Afghanistan. Donations from Saudi intelligence, the Saudi Red Crescent, the World Muslim League, and Saudi princes and mosques

were channeled through the Maktab. When Azzam was blown up in 1989, he was replaced in his leadership role by Osama bin Laden.²⁴

The nature of Afghan operations changed dramatically in 1985 when on March 11 of that year Mikhail Gorbachev replaced Konstantin Chernenko as general secretary of the Soviet Communist party. The White House was reliably informed that Moscow had decided to try to win the war within the next two years. To underscore his determination, Gorbachev accused Pakistan's President Zia of directly waging war against the Soviet Union and threatened retaliatory action unless Pakistan altered its course almost immediately. Gorbachev also turned command of the Afghan operations over to General Mikhail Zaitzev, the brutal military leader who had ended the "Prague Spring" in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Soviet Hind helicopter gunships began mowing down Afghan fighters. As one brave Canadian reporter remembers from her time on the ground, the gunships would come so close "you could see the whites of the pilot's eyes."²⁵ The Soviets also deployed the Spetsnaz, their elite fighting force. Thousands of Soviet elite soldiers poured into Afghanistan. The vehement new commitment of the Soviet Union in 1985 focused Washington's attention. "This was the escalation that scared us," remembered a key CIA operative.²⁶

In March 1985 the White House decided on one more push. On March 27 Reagan issued the highly secretive U.S. National Security Decision Directive 166, officially reorienting U.S. policies, programs, and strategies in Afghanistan.²⁷ The goal was no longer to "harass" the Russians but rather to "make the Russians get out."²⁸ The CIA was reorganized to give well-regarded operatives such as Milton Bearden and John "Jack" Devine a more prominent role.²⁹

The new directive and subsequent efforts profoundly altered the balance of power on the battlefield. No longer concerned with hiding its involvement, Washington began providing weaponry made in the United States. This included the powerful Stinger missile, at the time regarded as America's most sophisticated shoulder-fired missile and one that had never before been used in combat. The Stinger was an awesomely effective weapon, able to neutralize the highly destructive Soviet Hind gunships by forcing them to fly higher and out of range. Still, many warned presciently that once distributed, the Stingers could one day be used against the United States and its allies. Those arguing for its introduction responded, also correctly, that Stingers would alter the course of the war. From 1986 to 1987 the United States provided the mujahideen with around nine hundred Stinger missiles.³⁰ This was no doubt viewed by the Saudi defense establishment with some irony

given that they were providing funds for a ragtag group of fighters to buy sophisticated U.S. weaponry that the U.S. Congress would not allow Saudi Arabia to buy.

Arab support for the mujahideen increased alongside the 1985 U.S.-Soviet escalation. Around that time the CIA became aware of a significant increase in the number of Arab nationals traveling to Afghanistan to fight the holy war against the Soviets. Robert Gates, the deputy director of the CIA at the time, recalls that “they came from Syria, Iraq, Algeria and elsewhere and most fought with the Islamic fundamentalist Muj[ahideen] groups, particularly that headed by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. We examined ways to increase their participation, perhaps in the form of some sort of ‘international brigade,’ but nothing came of it.”³¹

The escalation against Soviet forces, particularly the introduction of Stinger missiles, convinced the Soviets they could not win in Afghanistan. After taking more casualties, undergoing considerable diplomatic wrangling, and pouring ever more arms and money into Afghanistan, the Soviets signed the Geneva accords on April 14, 1988, to end the war. On February 15, 1989, Lieutenant General Boris Gromov strode north across the bridge spanning the Amu Dar’ya River, the frontier between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. This terminated Moscow’s ill-fated nine-year Afghan military adventure. Between ten thousand and fifteen thousand Soviet soldiers had died—nearly one-quarter the number of Americans who perished in Vietnam. The devastation to Afghanistan was incalculable.

Saudi Arabia had played an important role in raising the costs for Moscow. It bought a considerable portion of the weapons that were eventually poured into Afghanistan and generously supplied Sunni Arab and Pashtun Afghan fighters. For every dollar the United States committed, Saudi Arabia provided another one through official channels. Through unofficial channels such as highly opaque and largely unaccountable charities, Saudi Arabia contributed even more. Afghanistan became the most visible example of close U.S.-Saudi cooperation in the developing world. As we will see, however, it was by no means the only one.

Although the Soviets withdrew their forces at the end of the decade, Saudi Arabia continued to confront security threats in Afghanistan as Iran attempted to influence politics there. Throughout the 1990s, Saudi Arabia and Iran competed for influence in Afghanistan and within the wider field of Central Asia, where the political vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union posed new challenges for each.

The chaos in Afghanistan had profoundly altered Saudi Arabia’s international environment and domestic fabric. To recruit fighters for Afghanistan and beat back Iran’s growing influence, the ruling family

allowed local clerics to saturate society with Wahhabi religious doctrine. The local environment was further radicalized by the return home of Afghan fighters, many of whom wished to continue their fight to impose a literalist and selective interpretation of Islamic law. Such changes at home made it increasingly difficult for the House of Saud to work closely with the United States. According to Professor F. Gregory Gause, III, a keen observer of Saudi Arabia, “the crucible of the development of bin Ladenism was the jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Among the Arab volunteers there, the retrograde social views and theological intolerance of Saudi Wahhabism came to blend with the revolutionary political doctrines developed in the 1960s by Muslim Brotherhood thinkers, particularly in Egypt.”³² The means by which both the United States and Saudi Arabia promoted their shared interests in the 1980s would destabilize their relationship in the years ahead. It also set the stage for a violent jihadi movement that today targets both countries and their global partners.

An “Ideological Super Bowl”: Aiding Jonas Savimbi in Angola

Saudi Arabia was not only helpful to the administration in Afghanistan, but also active in Africa, drawing on nearly a decade of its own anti-Libyan anti-Communist activities there. Reagan inherited Carter’s Angola policy, which withheld recognition from Angola but attempted low-level reconciliation with the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA)-led Angolan government. The Reagan administration looked on Communist support for the MPLA with concern, particularly the twenty-one thousand Cuban troops active there. However, because the Clark amendment prohibited U.S. aid and involvement in Angola, the Reagan administration would require third-party funds to counter Soviet and Cuban influence. Saudi Arabia became one of the many countries that proved helpful in this regard.

On March 19, 1981, two months after taking office, the Reagan administration announced that it would seek the repeal of the Clark amendment, which Ford had originally considered a “great tragedy.” As far as the Reagan team was concerned, Ford’s and Carter’s inability to block Soviet advances in Angola had only emboldened Moscow to push into other African countries, such as Ethiopia. When Jonas Savimbi, the leader of UNITA, one of the Angolan rebel groups fighting the MPLA, came to Washington in 1981, he received a much better reception than when he had visited during Carter’s time.³³