

NOW THAT IT IS FINALLY CONVENTIONAL WISDOM THE SAUDIS ARE PART OF THE PROBLEM...

There's nothing terrifically insightful about Tom Friedman's observation that the Saudis have fostered the extremist ideology that fuels ISIS.

The al-Sauds get to rule and live how they like behind walls, and the Wahhabis get to propagate Salafist Islam both inside Saudi Arabia and across the Muslim world, using Saudi oil wealth. Saudi Arabia is, in effect, helping to fund both the war against ISIS *and* the Islamist ideology that creates ISIS members (some 1,000 Saudis are believed to be fighting with jihadist groups in Syria), through Salafist mosques in Europe, Pakistan, Central Asia and the Arab world.

This game has reached its limit. First, because ISIS presents a challenge to Saudi Arabia. ISIS says it is the "caliphate," the center of Islam. Saudi Arabia believes it is the center. And, second, ISIS is threatening Muslims everywhere.

But the fact that one of the chosen clerics of mushy conventional wisdom now feels it's safe (admittedly in the second half of his column) to call out the Saudis for their extremism that has been ignored for over a decade is notable.

This comes against the background of renewed attention on the 28 pages from the Joint Congressional Inquiry George Bush suppressed 13 years ago to hide the Saudi role in 9/11.

Former Senate Intelligence Chair Bob Graham has been tireless at calling to have these pages –

which he co-authored – released publicly.

Presidents Bush and Obama have both refused to release 28 pages of those classified records. Though Graham cannot reveal the specific contents, he accuses the Saudi government of working against us behind the scenes, and he accuses the U.S. government of keeping it a secret (possibly to protect our oil interests or alliance with the Saudi Arabia).

“For 13 years, that information has been denied to the American people,” said Graham. “The pot is going to break soon.”

He says only a few members of congress have seen the information.

“Without exception, when they have put down the 28 pages, their reaction has been, ‘Oh God, I can’t believe this has really happened!’”

Lawrence Wright points to several unreliable sources – Bandar bin Sultan, Philip Zelikow – suggesting it would not reveal anything alarming.

The Saudis have also publicly demanded that the material be released. “Twenty-eight blanked-out pages are being used by some to malign our country and our people,” Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who was the Saudi Ambassador to the United States at the time of the 9/11 attacks, has declared. “Saudi Arabia has nothing to hide. We can deal with questions in public, but we cannot respond to blank pages.”

[snip]

The questions raised by the twenty-eight pages were an important part of the commission’s agenda; indeed, its director, Philip Zelikow, hired staffers who had worked for the Joint Inquiry on

that very section to follow up on the material. According to Zelikow, what they found does not substantiate the arguments made by the Joint Inquiry and by the 9/11 families in the lawsuit against the Saudis. He characterized the twenty-eight pages as “an agglomeration of preliminary, unvetted reports” concerning Saudi involvement. “They were wild accusations that needed to be checked out,” he said.

Zelikow and his staff were ultimately unable to prove any official Saudi complicity in the attacks.

One of Zelikow’s staffers (I suppose it could be Zelikow himself) reveals the real issue: reading these pages will make it harder for us to remain cozy with Saudi Arabia.

A former staff member of the 9/11 Commission who is intimately familiar with the material in the twenty-eight pages recommends against their declassification, warning that the release of inflammatory and speculative information could “ramp up passions” and damage U.S.-Saudi relations.

But given that the Saudis were far more closely tied to 9/11 (and, probably, some other attacks) than any other country, don’t we deserve to know that to act accordingly, especially as we prepare to fight a terrorist group strengthened by Bandar?

Matt Stoller calls all this censorship – and notes how it has prevented us from having the discussion we really need to have to resolve the underlying problems in the Middle East.

But the other part of the 9/11 narrative, aside from propaganda, was censorship. In America it’s not popular to talk about censorship, because it’s presumed that we don’t have it, as such.

There are no rooms full of censors who choose what goes into newspapers, and what doesn't. Our press is free. It's right there in the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law... prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.."

Somehow, though, Senators, Congressmen, and intelligence officials are not supposed to talk about those 28 pages in the 9/11 Commission report which are classified. And why not? Well because according to President Bush (and now President Obama), **doing so** would compromise "national security". But what, exactly, is censorship, if it's not a prohibition on individuals to speak about certain topics?

Traditionally, First Amendment law gives the highest protection to political speech, allowing for certain restrictions on commercial speech (like false advertising). But there is no higher form of speech than political speech, and there is more important form of political speech than the exposition of wrongdoing by the government. So how is this not censorship?

It clearly is. In other words, explicit government censorship combined with propaganda helped prevent the public from having a full discussion of what 9/11 meant, and what this event implied for our government's policies. Explicit censorship, under the guise of national security, continues today. While there are people in the U.S. government who know which Saudis financed and organized 9/11, the public at large does not. No government official can say 'this person funded Al Qaeda in 2001, he might be funding ISIS now', because that would reveal classified information.

[snip]

Unwinding the classified state, and beginning the adult conversation put off for seventy years about the nature of American power, is the predicate for building a global order that can drain the swampy brutal corners of the world that allow groups like ISIS to grow and thrive. To make that unwinding happen, we need to start demanding the truth, not what 'national security' tells us we need to know. The Constitution does not mention the words 'national security', it says 'common defense.' And that means that Americans should be getting accurate information about what exactly we are defending.

In yesterday's SASC hearing on ISIS, Joint Chiefs Chair Martin Dempsey said there is not military solution to ISIS (though he later, at the prodding of Carl Levin, modified that comment). But the non-military things we'd do – to combat the sources of and funding for ISIS' ideology – all point in one direction, and it's not Iraq or Syria.

Just as an example, the Obama Administration has repeatedly suggested that because the Iraqi government now has an "inclusive" government, it will mitigate the impetus behind terrorism. If that's true, then why don't we demand the same from the Saudis before we fight another war for them?

Whether or not you believe military involvement is wise or will be effective, it seems critical to do the other things to fight the treat of extremism. And for 13 years, we've been lying to ourselves about where that fight needs to start.