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We created Islamic extremism: Those blaming Islam for ISIS would have supported Osama bin Laden in the '80s

Jingoists conveniently forget the West's Cold War strategy was to arm the Islamic extremists that became al-Qaida

by Ben NORTON
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History takes no prisoners. It shows, with absolute lucidity, that the Islamic extremism ravaging the world today was borne out of the Western foreign policy of yesteryear.

Gore Vidal famously referred to the USA as the United States of Amnesia. The late Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai put it a little more delicately, quipping, “One of the delightful things about Americans is that they have absolutely no historical memory.”

In order to understand the rise of militant Salafi groups like ISIS and al-Qaida; in order to wrap our minds around their heinous, abominable attacks on civilians in the U.S., France, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Nigeria, Turkey, Yemen, Afghanistan and many, many more countries, we must rekindle this historical memory.

Where did violent Islamic extremism come from? In the wake of **the horrific Paris attacks on Friday, November the 13**, this is the question no one is asking — yet it is the most important one of all. If one doesn't know why a problem emerged, if one cannot find its root, one will never be able to solve and uproot it.

Where did militant Salafi groups like ISIS and al-Qaida come from? The answer is not as complicated as many make it out to be — but, to understand, we must delve into the history of the Cold War, the historical period lied about in the West perhaps more than any other.

How the West cultivated Osama bin Laden

We needn't reach back far into history, just a few decades.

A much-circulated photo of **an article** published in British newspaper the Independent in 1993 exemplifies the West's twisted hypocrisy. Titled “**Anti-Soviet warrior puts his army on the road to peace**,” it features a large photo of Osama bin Laden, who, at the time, was a Western ally.

The newspaper noted that bin Laden organized a militia of thousands of foreign fighters from throughout the Middle East and North Africa, and “supported them with weapons and his own construction equipment” in their fight against the USSR in the 1980s. “We beat the Soviet Union,” bin Laden boasted.

The mujahedin, the Islamic militias bankrolled by bin Laden, along with Maktab al-Khidamat — the organization bin Laden created to recruit and fund foreign Islamist fighters — are what eventually morphed into both al-Qaida and the Taliban.

“When the history of the Afghan resistance movement is written,” the Independent wrote, “Mr Bin Laden’s own contribution to the mujahedin... may turn out to be a turning point in the recent history of militant fundamentalism.”

Portraying bin Laden in a positive light, less than eight years before he would help mastermind the largest terrorist attack on American soil in decades, the British publication claimed that the “Saudi businessman who recruited mujahedin now uses them for large-scale building projects in Sudan.” In reality, bin Laden was setting the stages for what would become al-Qaida.

Unheeded warnings

In Greek mythology, Cassandra was blessed with the power of prophecy, but cursed in that no one would ever heed her warnings. Eqbal Ahmad, the late political scientist, historian and expert in the study of terrorism, was a modern-day Cassandra.

In a **speech** at the University of Colorado, Boulder in October 1998, Ahmad **warned** that the U.S. policy in Afghanistan would backfire:

“In Islamic history, jihad as an international violent phenomenon had disappeared in the last 400 years, for all practical purposes. It was revived suddenly with American help in the 1980s. When the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan, Zia ul-Haq, the [U.S.-backed] military dictator of Pakistan, which borders on Afghanistan, saw an opportunity and launched a jihad there against godless communism. The U.S. saw a God-sent opportunity to mobilize one billion Muslims against what Reagan called the ‘Evil Empire.’

“Money started pouring in. CIA agents starting going all over the Muslim world recruiting people to fight in the great jihad. Bin Laden was one of the early prize recruits. He was not only an Arab. He was also a Saudi. He was not only a Saudi. He was also a multimillionaire, willing to put his own money into the matter. Bin Laden went around recruiting people for the jihad against communism.

“I first met him in 1986. He was recommended to me by an American official of whom I do not know whether he was or was not an agent. I was talking to him and said, ‘Who are the Arabs here who would be very interesting?’ By here I meant in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He said, ‘You must meet Osama.’ I went to see Osama. There he was, rich, bringing in recruits from Algeria, from Sudan, from Egypt, just like Sheikh Abdul Rahman. This fellow was an ally. He remained an ally.

“He turns at a particular moment. In 1990, the U.S. goes into Saudi Arabia with forces. Saudi Arabia is the holy place of Muslims, Mecca, and Medina. There had never been foreign troops there. In 1990, during the Gulf War, they went in, in the name of helping Saudi Arabia defeat Saddam Hussein. Osama Bin Laden remained quiet.

“Saddam was defeated, but the American troops stayed on in the land of the Ka’aba [the most sacred site of Islam, in Mecca], foreign troops. He wrote letter after letter saying, ‘Why are you here? Get out! You came to help but you have

stayed on.’ Finally he started a jihad against the other occupiers. His mission is to get American troops out of Saudi Arabia. His earlier mission was to get Russian troops out of Afghanistan.”

For bin Laden, Ahmad added, “America has broken its word. The loyal friend has betrayed. The one to whom you swore blood loyalty has betrayed you.”

“They’re going to go for you. They’re going to do a lot more,” Ahmad warned, three years before the 9/11 attacks. “These are the chickens of the Afghanistan war coming home to roost.”

We now know that Ahmad was right. But, like Cassandra, the powerful ignored his sagacious admonition, and suffered the horrific consequences.

Extremist “freedom fighters”

In the **1950s and ’60s**, Afghanistan was a somewhat secular country in which women were granted relatively equal rights. What turned Afghanistan into the hotbed for extremism it is today? Decades of Western meddling.

Throughout the 1980s, the CIA, through the Pakistani government — more specifically Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) — supported and armed the mujahedin in Afghanistan in their fight against the Soviet Union, in what was dubbed Operation Cyclone. President Ronald **Reagan famously met with the mujahedin** in the Oval Office in 1983. “To watch the courageous Afghan freedom fighters battle modern arsenals with simple hand-held weapons is an inspiration to those who love freedom,” Reagan **declared**.

Those “freedom fighters” are the forefathers of ISIS and al-Qaida. When the last Soviet troops were withdrawn in 1989, the mujahedin did not simply leave; a civil war of sorts followed, with various Islamist militant groups fighting for control in the power vacuum. The Taliban came out on top, and established a medieval theocratic regime to replace the former “godless” socialist government.

There are extremists in every religion, but they tend to be few in number, weak and isolated. Salafism, in its modern militarized form, has its origins in the 1920s, and even before. For decades, this movement remained weak and isolated. Yet, in the 1970s and ’80s, Western capitalist governments, particularly the U.S., came up with a new Cold War strategy: supporting these fringe Islamic extremist groups as a bulwark against socialism.

The U.S. was by no means the only one to pursue such a strategy. Echoing the U.S. policy in Afghanistan, Israel in fact supported Hamas — now its sworn arch-enemy — when the Islamist group was first forming in the 1980s. Israel backed Hamas’ militant founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in order to undermine the secular socialist resistance of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

“Hamas, to my great regret, is Israel’s creation,” a former Israeli government official told the Wall Street Journal in a 2009 article titled **“How Israel Helped to Spawn Hamas.”**

This Cold War strategy ended up being successful: After the fall of the USSR, the secular socialist groups that dominated the resistance movements of the Middle East

were replaced by Islamic extremists ones that had previously been supported by the West.

It is not a coincidence that most of the secular countries in the history of the Middle East have been socialist of some sort. In contrast, the most reactionary countries — the countries where women are not granted equal rights and where the rule of law is based on Sharia — have frequently tended to be close Western allies. Why? The West was much, much more interested in preserving capitalism than it was in allowing secularism, gender equality and relative economic equality to flourish under socialism.

Orientalist posturing

Many pundits, including liberals, have argued that the Middle East, North Africa and Muslim-majority parts of South Asia are presently going through their parallel to the West's Dark Age, a bloody period of religious extremism. They blame the rise of extremist groups like ISIS and al-Qaida on Islam itself, or on the Middle East's supposedly "backward" culture, yet conveniently gloss over their own countries' sordid histories and policies.

There is much more than a tinge of racism in this orientalist idea that, for some reason, Muslims in the Middle East are centuries behind the enlightened Christian West. This ludicrous claim does not stand up to even the most superficial historical scrutiny.

For one, never mentioned is the fact that, only decades ago, most Middle Eastern countries were Western colonies. Their civilian populations were terrorized and brutalized by Western colonial powers.

And, again, what were the most secular and modern governments in the history of the Middle East? It was almost always the Soviet-aligned or non-aligned leftist governments that were either enemies of the West or non-allies in the Cold War.

Regardless of the critiques of these governments' many problems, which is a separate issue, the reality is the Middle East was significantly more progressive and secular during the height of the Cold War than it is today. That's not a coincidence. The U.S. and its allies destroyed secularism as part of their larger Cold War strategy.

The Cold War bites back

This Cold War strategy continues to bite back today, and hard. Because of this policy, we have now ended up with capitalist dystopias like those in Saudi Arabia, Qatar or the UAE — filthy rich **oil states** where businessmen are drowning in money while the migrant **modern-day slaves** upon which **their economies are built** die in droves, and theocratic monarchies **imprison or even behead anyone who challenges the regime**.

The Gulf states remain some of the most reactionary and extremist countries on the planet, and they happen to be close Western allies. Saudi Arabia, in particular, is **the fountainhead of militant Sunni Islamism** — and yet the Obama administration has done more than \$100 billion in arms deals with the Saudi monarchy in just five years. In fact, less than three days after the Paris attacks, the U.S. **sold another \$1.3 billion of bombs** to Saudi Arabia — bombs it will likely use to drop on Yemen, where human

rights organizations say it is **committing egregious war crimes**, and where the chaos created by the Saudi-led coalition is helping al-Qaida and ISIS expand into Yemen.

Former U.S. Sen. Bob Graham has **observed** that modern Sunni extremist groups like ISIS and al-Qaida are “a product of Saudi ideals, Saudi money, and Saudi organizational support.” Government **cables leaked by WikiLeaks** demonstrate that the U.S. is well aware that al-Qaida and other Salafi groups are supported by rich Saudis.

Let us not forget that Osama bin Laden was a millionaire businessman from a fabulously wealthy and prominent Saudi family with close ties to the kingdom’s royalty. He used that wealth to finance an international network of Islamic extremists that coalesced into al-Qaida.

This doesn’t mean that the Saudi monarchy is pulling the strings above ISIS — which is now its enemy — but rather that its global proselytizing and funding of Wahhabi groups and institutions made these once fringe extremist groups much stronger and more mainstream.

Ideologies are not devoid from material reality. Yes, there are extremists in every religion, but why do they not have the same power in other faiths? There is no such thing as an ideology independent of the material conditions and social forces that assert that ideology materially — that is to say, politically — in reality. Islamic extremism was violently imposed upon the Middle East through a mixture of imperial machinations and individual radicalization under tyranny and extreme poverty.

Creating your enemies

Western imperialism has a tendency to create its own enemies.

Up until the 1990 Gulf War, throughout the Iran-Iraq War that consumed the 1980s, the U.S. supported Saddam Hussein — the very same dictator it would violently depose in 2003. **Declassified CIA files** show how the U.S. government helped Hussein when he was unleashing chemical weapons on Iranian civilians. The U.K. government allowed Hussein’s regime to create chemical weapons using **agents that were sold to Iraq by British corporations**. These Western-provided weapons were also used in Hussein’s campaign of genocide against the Kurds.

Fast-forwarding two decades later, it is now **widely acknowledged** that the illegal U.S.-led war in Iraq — a catastrophic occupation that led to the deaths of at least 1 million people — destabilized the entire Middle East, creating the extreme conditions in which militant groups like al-Qaida spread like wildfire, eventually leading to the emergence of ISIS. The former head of intelligence for the U.S. Central Command and Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn, **agrees**. U.S. policies in Iraq “absolutely” strengthened Salafi militant groups like al-Qaida, Lt. Gen. Flynn conceded. “We definitely put fuel on a fire,” he lamented.

New York Rep. **Chuck Schumer remarked** in 1991 that Saddam Hussein was “created in the White House laboratory with a collection of government programs, banks, and private companies.”

Saddam Hussein was the first Frankenstein’s monster U.S. policy created in Iraq, al-

Qaida was the second, and now ISIS is the third.

Blaming Islam is projection

The pundits in the West blaming Islam for the rise of extremism are projecting their own countries' crimes onto the world's 1.6 billion Muslims.

The kinds of people who blame Islam and Muslims for the spread of extremism are the kinds of people who have utmost faith in Western empire. Even if they admit that it "sometimes" engages in problematic behavior, they, deep-down, believe Western empire to be fundamentally rooted in good will, in humanitarianism, in progress, in the proselytizing of civilization.

This is the same logic that justified genocidal European colonialism, Western expansionism and Manifest Destiny, and the White Man's Burden. And it is this same logic that **promotes militarist policies and anti-Muslim and anti-refugee bigotries** in response to Islamist militants' attacks — only serving to further fuel the fire of extremism.

These same pundits, the ones who blame Islam for the rise of ISIS and who have utmost faith in the putative good will of Western empire, would have wholeheartedly supported Osama bin Laden in the 1980s; these same pundits would have dubbed the father of al-Qaida a "freedom fighter" in his heroic battle against the evil Soviet Union.

In the aforementioned speech, Ahmad articulated five kinds of terrorism. He lamented, however, that of these types, the focus in the media and the political system is almost always on just one: "political terror of the private group, oppositional terror" — which he points out is "the least important in terms of cost to human lives and human property." "The highest cost is state terror," Ahmad explained. He roughly estimated that the ratio of people killed by state terror versus those killed by individual acts of terror is, conservatively, 100,000 to one.

If we truly want to end the abominable acts of violence perpetrated by extremist groups like ISIS and al-Qaida, we should take to heart the simple yet profound **counsel of Noam Chomsky**, another modern-day Cassandra: "Everybody's worried about stopping terrorism. Well, there's a really easy way: stop participating in it."