

Secret Affairs: Britain's collusion with radical Islam

A revealing insight into political criminality and warmongering—Part 1

By Jean Shaoul
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Mark Curtis, in his *Secret Affairs: Britain's collusion with radical Islam*, has investigated how Britain worked with state sponsors of terrorism as well as radical Islamic groups in the post-World War II period in the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia.

Curtis' book presents a devastating indictment of the criminality of successive governments in the post-war period, whose dirty wars, covert operations, attempted coups, collusion with the US "extraordinary renditions," kidnappings and torture, assassinations and "special operations" illustrate the bloody role of British imperialism.

Britain's collusion with Islamist fundamentalist forces, prepared to use atrocities to achieve their objectives, is in sharp contrast to the official line that Britain is conducting a "war on terror."

Curtis, a former research fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) and former Director of the World Development Movement (now called Global Justice Now), has written other useful books, including *Web of Deceit* and *Unpeople*, which expose the lies put out by successive governments to cover for Britain's imperialist depredations. His own purpose is to explain the rise of "home grown terrorists" in Britain, in the context of the coordinated bombings on London transport on July 7, 2005 (7/7) that killed 52 people and injured more than 700; and British intelligence claims that they prevented 12 terrorist plots in Britain during the 2000s and knew of the existence of 2,000 terrorists organised in 200 networks.

Curtis argues, using evidence from declassified files from the National Archives, Hansard reports, leaks and government statements, that this is not simply the result of Britain's wars and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, but of two further factors.

First, Britain's decades-long support for some of the most noxious regimes on the planet, such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia that have sponsored Islamist groups for their own purposes. Second, the willingness of successive British governments to work with reactionary right-wing forces, including radical Islamists and terrorist groups, to prop up authoritarian regimes allied to Britain, undermine unstable regimes perceived as hostile to British interests and install more pliant regimes.

While the US' role in sponsoring Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden is well known. Britain's part in fostering Al Qaeda and similar groups and/or working with them, sometimes in cooperation with Washington as a junior partner or sub-contractor, sometimes on its own account, has generally been omitted.

Britain's broader strategy has been to keep the people of the region tied to a capitalist perspective and the Middle East divided so that no single power dominates oil supplies. Its purpose was twofold: to preserve the commercial position of its oil giants Shell and BP, which controlled one-sixth of the world's oil and 40 percent of the Gulf's oil, mostly in Iran and Kuwait; and to retain the financial benefits derived from the

"substantial Arab foreign exchange reserves in sterling" that accrued from oil.

Operations against bourgeois nationalist governments in the 1950s

For decades, Britain has worked with Jihadi groups on an ad hoc basis, switching sides as the need arises.

In the early 1950s, Britain's spy agency MI6 worked with the CIA to topple the nationalist regime of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq, who planned to nationalise BP's Iranian oil operations. A key ally in the early stages of their plans were Shi'ite clerical forces loyal to Ayatollah Kashani, later to become the mentor to Ruhollah Khomeini, who was among the MI6/CIA sponsored-crowd protesting against Mosaddeq in 1953. The British dropped Kashani as being too hostile to British interests, but not before using his forces as shock troops to pave the way for the return of the Shah, who imposed a dictatorial regime subservient to his patrons.

Britain cooperated with the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in a bid to undermine Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser's newly installed and fiercely nationalist regime. It was after a failed assassination attempt that Britain, along with France and Israel, invaded Egypt at the end of October 1956 to overthrow Nasser, even though British officials feared that the political beneficiaries would be the Brotherhood.

Britain again used the Brotherhood to foment dissent in Syria during the late 1950s and provide the basis for two abortive coups, with Prime Minister Harold Macmillan authorising the assassination of key government and military officials and the leader of the Syrian Communist party.

Britain's backing for the House of Saud

A key element in London's efforts to contain secular Arab nationalism in the late 1950s was its backing for Saudi Arabia's theocratic and authoritarian regime, which controlled the region's largest oil reserves. The Saudi royal family, which uses and exports its own brand of Islamism, Wahhabism, to legitimise its tyrannical rule, welcomed the Brotherhood, recently expelled from Egypt, and, along with the CIA, poured money into their religious seminaries and enterprises. This was part of its broader strategy of promoting the rise of right-wing political Islam, and countering and suppressing the growth of any progressive political tendencies within the working class. The House of Saud is believed to have spent \$50 billion since the 1970s promoting Wahhabism around the globe, in what one US think tank describes as the "largest worldwide propaganda campaign ever mounted."

Israel's destruction of the Arab armies, in the space of six days in June 1967, played a major role in politically discrediting the secular nationalist regimes of Egypt and Syria, and their backers in the Soviet Union. They

had proved incapable of reconciling their differences and taking even the most elementary precautions to protect their equipment and installations from surprise attacks by Israel, much less defeating Israel.

Disillusionment with bourgeois nationalism enabled the revival, during the 1970s, of the Muslim Brotherhood and similar forces throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The Islamist groups were able to fill the political vacuum created by the insistence of the Stalinists and their Pabloite supporters that the working class had no independent political role to play.

A further defeat of the Arab powers in the October 1973 war and the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973 served to enrich the feudal states of the Arabian Peninsula and to enhance their influence.

As Curtis explains, this led Britain to make frantic and obsequious efforts to ensure that this newfound wealth was recycled through the City of London. Following the loosening of controls on the movement of capital in 1979 and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the City became a major centre for the promotion of “Islamic banking” and “Islamic finance” across the world.

Militant Islamic groups benefited from the new-found wealth of the oil-rich states both directly and indirectly.

Popular support for Islamic groups began to grow throughout the region, particularly among the most impoverished layers and the rural poor, due to their provision of basic social services funded by the religious authorities in the Gulf. As a result, by the end of the 1970s, Arab nationalism—with the possible and temporary exception of Palestinian nationalism—was largely a spent force.

In Iran, the betrayals of the Stalinised Tudeh party paved the way for the establishment of an Islamic theocracy following the popular uprising in 1979 against the Shah’s tyrannical regime. This inspired and promoted a network of Shi’ite groups, including Amal and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shi’ite opposition elements to the Iraqi regime, and Shi’ite minorities in the Gulf States. And it encouraged the growth of other Islamist tendencies, including Sunni groups, which both Washington and London promoted in collaboration with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

The imperialist powers viewed Sunni groupings as a mechanism for countering Moscow’s influence in the Middle East and internationally; as a political weapon against radical nationalists, such as the Ba’ath Parties in Syria and Iraq; ballast for the reactionary monarchs of Jordan and Saudi Arabia; and as an anti-Communist force through which to divert the oppressed masses with radical sounding rhetoric.

Britain’s role in the Afghan war

Al Qaeda and its former leader Osama bin Laden, who had direct links with Saudi intelligence from the early years of the anti-Soviet Jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, was a vital element of that policy. It was only one of a number of such groups that Riyadh bankrolled during the Afghan war.

As Curtis explains, while the British government, in public, denied any military involvement in the war, in reality it had been providing covert assistance to Afghani Islamists even before the war started and authorised MI6 operations in the first year of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. MI6 activated its longstanding network of spies and coordinated training alongside the CIA and Pakistan’s intelligence service, the ISI.

Britain’s SAS played a direct part in the war, unlike its US counterparts, because it was subject to far less oversight. It trained and supported various Islamist groups and directed them in covert guerrilla operations against the southern Soviet republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The end of the Afghan war in 1989 left the Islamists as the dominant political force in the country, vying among themselves for control of Afghanistan. Foreign Jihadis who received military training at the hands of the British went home to set up organisations to fight their own

governments and mount terrorist attacks.

Britain continued to support some of these groups in the 1990s, using them as proxy forces in Bosnia, Azerbaijan, Kosovo and Libya. They launched terrorist attacks, first in Muslim countries and then in the US and Europe.

Britain’s support for Pakistan

Britain also backed a second state sponsor of terrorist groups, Pakistan, after General Zia ul-Haq’s seizure of power in a coup in 1977, supplying it with arms. Lacking a political base, Zia sought the support of the mullahs, promoted the rise of Islamism and backed the Jamaat-i-Islam, which was the main conduit for Saudi aid to the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan. He also supported the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Assembly of Islamic Clergy), which ran a massive network of religious schools.

Zia and the Islamists’ aim was to channel the increasing discontent of the masses with the corrupt bourgeois parties away from left politics. In this, they had the whole-hearted support of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and successive British governments which provided Pakistan with diplomatic cover, arms, military training, aid and foreign direct investment.

Two major terrorist groups were established. The first was Harakat al-Jihad al-Islami. One of its split-offs was trained by the British-funded Haqqani faction in Afghanistan and went on to recruit thousands of volunteers to fight there, including thousands of Britons of Pakistani descent, and later became active against Indian forces in Kashmir. Kashmir has now become a major flashpoint that could trigger a war between two nuclear-armed states.

The second developed out of a Sunni missionary organisation reportedly established with seed money from Bin Laden that joined the Afghan Jihad. It too mounted attacks on Indian-administered Kashmir, becoming Pakistan’s largest jihadist organisation with which the 7/7 London bombers had close links.

Britain supported Pakistan’s use of Islamist terrorist groups for covert operations in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Chechnya, the location of the huge energy resources of Central Asia, thereby facilitating British energy corporations’ access to the region. At the very least, it acquiesced in Islamabad and Riyadh’s funding and arming of the Taliban, which emerged victorious after a brutal civil war in Afghanistan in 1996, thereby entrenching Al Qaeda.

To be continued

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