

Secret Affairs: Britain's collusion with radical Islam

A revealing insight into political criminality and warmongering—Part 2

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6 March 2017

This is the second of a two-part series. Part 1 was posted March 4.

“Londonistan” as a centre for terrorist groups

This sordid and cynical relationship positioned Britain as a leading arms exporter, second only to the US, and the City of London as an international financial centre. It also turned London into a major centre in the 1990s for Islamist groups organising terrorism abroad—earning it the sobriquet of “Londonistan.”

Groups such as Algeria's Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), Egyptian Islamic Jihad and Al Qaeda all had offices in London. Al Qaeda considered London the nerve centre of its operations in Europe.

These groups raised millions of pounds to fund and recruit militants to fight around the world. Thousands of young men went from Britain to train in camps overseas, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan, with the knowledge, if not encouragement, of the British government, despite the fact that it was an offence to aid a group proscribed under the 2000 Terrorism Act. British authorities ignored numerous complaints, both domestic and overseas, about extremism, and dragged their feet over requests for the investigation or extradition of terrorist suspects.

Several Islamists refer to Whitehall having given them a “green light” as long as they only carried out terrorist activities overseas, including Abu Hamza, the former cleric at Finsbury Park mosque, Khaled al-Fawwaz, the head of Bin Laden's London operation and Omar Bakri Mohammed, who established the militant al-Muhajiroun group that sent fighters to Kashmir, Chechnya and Kosovo.

There is evidence that the security services collaborated directly with some of these organisations and their leaders, including Abu Hamza. Abu Qatada, the Jordanian cleric sentenced in absentia for terrorist activities who became known as Al Qaeda's spiritual leader in Europe, reportedly worked as a double agent for MI5.

Abdel Hakim Belhaj, a leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), who fought in the Soviet-Afghan war and subsequently joined Al Qaeda, claims that MI6 sponsored (unsuccessful) assassination attacks by LIFG on Libya's then leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Subsequently, following Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's infamous “deal in the sand” with Gaddafi in 2004, Britain cooperated with the CIA in Belhaj's kidnapping, rendition to Libya and interrogation under torture.

After Belhaj's release in 2009 by Gaddafi under a general amnesty, Britain again made use of the LIFG as a proxy force in 2011 to topple the Libyan leader in the NATO-led intervention. The British

authorities have sought to suppress court cases brought by Belhaj in order to prevent the exposure of its links with such forces.

9/11 and the “global war on terror”

The Al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in 2001 were in part the product of Saudi Arabian and Pakistani support for Jihadi groups.

Curtis points to a possible British connection. Omar Saeed Sheikh, a Briton of Pakistani origin found guilty in 2002 of orchestrating the beheading of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, acted as a conduit for ISI, Pakistan's intelligence service, and wired funds to the leader of the 9/11 plotters.

Sheikh admitted being an ISI agent, while Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf later accused him of also being an MI6 agent. It seems that London offered him an amnesty in 1999, after his release from an Indian prison for kidnapping four British and American tourists in 1994, in return for acting as an informant. At the very least, this implies that the ISI and therefore probably US and British officials, had foreknowledge of the 9/11 attack. The UK has not investigated Sheikh's links to 9/11 to avoid jeopardising its relations with Pakistan.

Following 9/11, these same terrorist groups provided another useful service to the imperialist powers: as justification for a new series of wars for the domination of energy-rich regions in Central Asia and the Middle East. While the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq ostensibly targeted the groups Washington and London had previously supported, their key allies were Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the key sponsors of these groups.

Prime Minister Blair seized on the “global war on terror” to piggyback Washington's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in pursuit of Britain's own imperialist interests. Following the Strategic Defence Review in 1998, the Labour government reconfigured its military forces so that they could intervene as a “pre-emptive” military force in an offensive capacity to “project power overseas” with “expeditionary forces” to support “political objectives,” including countering international terrorism.

Britain's close support for Saudi Arabia dovetailed its need for oil and gas, as Britain became a net importer of energy by the mid-2000s. Blair even intervened to stop a Serious Fraud Office investigation of bribery by Britain's largest arms corporation BAE to secure a massive Saudi arms deal.

Similarly, Blair supported Musharraf, ostensibly because Pakistan was a “frontline state” in the war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in

Afghanistan. As the Blair government well knew, Musharraf backed Pakistan's domestic radical Islamists in his twin-pronged war against Indian-controlled Kashmir and his own secular nationalist opponents. He did little if anything to end Pakistan's support for the Taliban and Al Qaeda, allowing Bin Laden to take up residence in Abbottabad, near the Pakistan Military Academy.

The London bombings

The coordinated bombings on July 7, 2005 (7/7) on London transport was the worst terrorist atrocity in Britain. The perpetrators were five British Islamists, three of whom had links to a terrorist infrastructure established by Pakistan, which in turn benefited from British support, and were possibly trained by Pakistan's security service.

The security forces had predicted the rise of "home-grown terrorists." Three months before the 7/7 attacks, a classified government report noted that the wars and on-going occupation of Iraq had exacerbated the threat of international terrorism. Several of the bombers had visited Pakistan where they received training in making explosives from groups that received support from Britain during the Afghan war in the 1980s.

This in turn raises the question of British state involvement in the London bombings, something Curtis ignores. There are numerous indications that a section of the state or intelligence apparatus allowed the terrorists to carry out the 7/7 operation. These include reports that several of the bombers were known to the authorities and had been under surveillance for two years as a result of their links to Pakistan and Al Qaeda; the Israeli embassy received a warning about the bombings; Israel's security service Mossad and the Saudi government alerted MI5, Britain's domestic spy agency, of a possible attack; military explosives appear to have been used; and the fact that the national security threat was downgraded despite a G8 summit in Scotland.

In every similar case—September 11, 2001 in New York City, April 15, 2013 in Boston, November 13, 2015 in Paris and the December 2016 Christmas market attack in Berlin—the security services had the attackers under surveillance for a lengthy period of time and did not intervene to stop them carrying out their plots.

Despite government claims that most of the known terrorist plots against British targets involved groups with links to Pakistan-based Jihadi groups, and a Ministry of Defence think tank's report that the ISI supported terrorism and extremism—leaked to the media in 2006—the Blair government continued to support Musharraf until he resigned in 2008 to avoid impeachment.

This leads to the fundamental drawback of Curtis' review: his inability to *explain* Britain's covert collusion with these Islamist forces and their political purpose. He concludes that the various operations are a blot on Britain's democracy, having caused various types of "blowback" and having been largely ineffectual in terms of their stated foreign policy objectives.

One could read much of the book and conclude that the British government was merely hypocritical and cynical, that its policies were mistaken and could therefore be changed. But Britain's foreign policy was no mistake. Its foreign policy record testifies to its fear of the working class and the oppressed internationally, nowhere more than in the resource-rich Middle East, leaving it with no choice but to support the most foul forces to preserve its interests.

In the aftermath of World War II, the imperialist powers, whose wars, local stooges and subsequent intrigues had impoverished the

region, faced the undying hatred of the masses, dominated politically by the Stalinised Communist parties of the region. Following Moscow's line, those parties and their leftist supporters insisted that the working class had no independent political role to play, dragooning it behind nationalist leaders who sought to supplant Britain and exploit the region's wealth for their own benefit.

When direct rule became impossible, the imperialist powers ruled via their clients, and supported any and all political tendencies that would divide the working class and rural poor along sectarian and ethnic lines and so prevent a unified struggle to overthrow capitalism. After the national bourgeoisie, riding on the back of mass opposition to indirect colonial rule, took power, Britain and other major powers again colluded with these forces, switching sides and alliances as circumstances changed. As Lord Palmerston famously told the House of Commons in 1848, "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow..."

At home, Britain has used these groups as the justification for a raft of anti-democratic measures, which gets little attention in Curtis' book.

The Labour government used the 9/11 attack in New York, and the terrorist atrocity of 7/7 and other attacks, actual and planned, on British soil, to strengthen police powers to detain suspects, codified in the 2001 Terrorism Act; overturn long-standing democratic rights, including the legal principle of presumption of innocence in the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005; criminalise the "encouragement" and "incitement" of terrorism in 2006; and position Britain as a leading player in a global spying network in alliance with the US National Security Agency (NSA). The Tories, for their part, introduced legislation ostensibly targeting "extremists" that in effect enables the authorities to criminalise speech and political opposition to the government's policies of aggressive militarism abroad and austerity at home.

The government and state machinery have eviscerated the entire framework of legal and democratic rights fought for in the course of hundreds of years. The target is not primarily the reactionary Islamist network, but opposition from the working class to the government's policies of austerity, war and the assault on democratic rights.

Despite its political limitations, Curtis' book is a valuable piece of investigative journalism, particularly given the extraordinary level of secrecy surrounding UK foreign policy.

Concluded

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