

Introduction to *Secret Affairs: Britain's Collusion with Radical Islam*

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During the recent upheavals in the Middle East, known as the 'Arab Spring', one important aspect of British foreign policy has been ignored by the mainstream media: British collusion with radical Islamic actors to promote oil and other commercial or strategic interests. Indeed, this policy has a long history, which this book will tell, and has contributed not only to the rise of radical Islam itself but also to that of international terrorism, which the British government's new *National Security Strategy* identifies as the country's biggest threat. The intelligence agencies say they have prevented twelve terrorist plots in Britain over the past decade, and claim there are 2,000 known terrorist suspects organised in 200 networks. Counterterrorism officials have also warned of a 'huge spectacular', and shooting and hostage-taking raids involving gunmen with bombs. The extent of this threat is all too easily exaggerated for political purposes – the former director of MI5, Stella Rimington, has, for example, accused the government of 'frightening people in order to be able to pass laws which restrict civil liberties'. But Britain, along with many other countries, clearly does face a threat from radical Islamic groups. The July 2005 London bombings, which killed 52 people, constituted the first 'successful' attack by Islamists in Britain, and the British courts have convicted over 80 individuals who planned to kill British citizens in acts of terrorism. Meanwhile, Britain's most senior military figure has called the threat posed by Islamist extremism 'the struggle of our generation – perhaps our Thirty Years' War'.

How we got to this point has been the subject of much speculation as to how 'home-grown' British citizens can turn to terrorist violence and be prepared to blow themselves up. Right-wing commentators typically blame liberal culture, arguing that laws have not been tough enough to clamp down on extremism, or even that multi-culturalism has made it impossible to challenge people of a different faith. The government has been widely attacked since 7/7 for failing to clamp down on a number of Islamist radicals in Britain – most notoriously, Abu Hamza, the former preacher at the Finsbury Park mosque in north London, who was allowed to openly encourage numerous young Muslims to espouse violent jihad. For others, and many on the political Left, the terrorist threat has been fuelled by British military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and Whitehall's siding with Israel in its

conflict in occupied Palestine. These are surely major factors: in April 2005, for example, the Joint Intelligence Committee stated, in a report leaked the following year, that the Iraq conflict 'has exacerbated the threat from international terrorism and will continue to have an impact in the long term. It has reinforced the determination of terrorists who were already committed to attacking the West and motivated others who were not.' This followed a joint Home Office/Foreign Office report, called 'Young Muslims and Extremism', which was also leaked and which stated that there was 'a perceived "double standard" among many Muslims in Britain who believe that British foreign policy, in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir and Chechnya is 'against Islam'.

But there is a big missing link in this commentary, and Britain's contribution to the rise of the terrorist threat goes well beyond the impacts its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have had on some individuals. The more important story is that British governments, both Labour and Conservative, have, in pursuing the so-called national interest' abroad, colluded for decades with radical Islamic forces, including terrorist organisations. They have connived with them, worked alongside them and sometimes trained and financed them, in order to promote specific foreign policy objectives. Governments have done so in often desperate attempts to maintain Britain's global power in the face of increasing weakness in key regions of the world, being unable to unilaterally impose their will and lacking other local allies. Thus the story is intimately related to that of Britain's imperial decline and the attempt to maintain influence in the world.

With some of these radical Islamic forces, Britain has been in a permanent, strategic alliance to secure fundamental, long-term foreign policy goals; with others, it has been a temporary marriage of convenience to achieve specific short-term outcomes. The US has been shown by some analysts to have nurtured Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaida, but Britain's part in fostering Islamist terrorism is invariably left out of these accounts, and the history has never been told. Yet this collusion has had more impact on the rise of the terrorist threat than either Britain's liberal culture or the inspiration for jihadism provided by the occupation of Iraq. The closest that the mainstream media have got to this story was in the period immediately after 7/7, when sporadic reports revealed links between the British security services and Islamist militants living in London. Some of these individuals were reportedly working as British agents or informers while being involved in terrorism overseas. Some were apparently being protected by the British security services while being wanted by foreign governments. This is an important but only a small part of the much bigger picture which mainly concerns Britain's foreign policy.

Whitehall has been colluding with two sets of Islamist actors which have strong connections with each other. In the first group are the major state sponsors of Islamist terrorism, the two most important of which are key British allies with whom London has long-standing strategic partnerships – Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Foreign policy planners have routinely covertly collaborated with the Saudis and the Pakistanis in their foreign policy, while both states are now seen as key allies in

what was until recently described as the War on Terror. Yet the extent of Riyadh's and Islamabad's nurturing of radical Islam around the world dwarfs that of other countries, notably official enemies such as Iran or Syria. As we shall see, Saudi Arabia, especially after the oil price boom of 1973 which propelled it to a position of global influence, has been the source of billions of dollars that have flowed to the radical Islamic cause, including terrorist groups, around the world. A good case can be made that al-Qaida is partly a creature of Britain's Saudi ally, given the direct links between Saudi intelligence and Bin Laden from the early years of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Pakistan, meanwhile, has been a major sponsor of various terrorist groups since General Zia ul-Haq seized power in a military coup in 1977 – military support brought some groups into being, after which they were nurtured with arms and training. The 7/7 bombers and many other would-be British terrorists are partly the product of subsequent decades of official Pakistani patronage of these groups. And today it is the Pakistan-based networks which pose the largest threat to Britain and which are at the centre of global terrorism, having become perhaps even more important than al-Qaida, despite the Western media's focus on Bin Laden. Both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are partly British creations: Saudi Arabia was bloodily forged in the 1920s with British arms and diplomatic support, while Pakistan was hived off from India in 1947 with the help of British planners. These countries, while being very different in many ways, share a fundamental lack of legitimacy other than as 'Muslim states'. The price paid by the world for their patronage of particularly extreme versions of Islam – and British support of them – has been very great indeed. Given their alliance with Britain, it is no surprise that British leaders have not called for Islamabad and Riyadh to be bombed alongside Kabul and Baghdad, since the War on Terror is clearly no such war at all, but rather a conflict with enemies specially designated by Washington and London. This has left much of the real global terrorist infrastructure intact, posing further dangers to the British and world public.

The second group of Islamist actors with whom Britain has colluded is extremist movements and organisations. Among the most influential of the movements that appear throughout this book is the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt in 1928 and has developed into an influential worldwide network, and the Jamaat-i-Islami (Islamic Party), founded in British India in 1941, which has become a major political and ideological force in Pakistan. Britain has also covertly worked alongside the Darul Islam (House of Islam) movement in Indonesia, which has provided important ideological underpinnings to the development of terrorism in that country. Though Britain has mainly collaborated with Sunni movements in promoting its foreign policy, it has also at times not been averse to conniving with Shia forces, such as with Iranian Shia radicals in the 1950s, and before and after the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979.

Britain has, however, also worked in covert operations and wars with a variety of outright jihadist terrorist groups, sometimes linked to the movements just

mentioned. These groups have promoted the most reactionary of religious and political agendas and routinely committed atrocities against civilians. Collusion of this type began in Afghanistan in the 1980s, when Britain, along with the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, covertly supported the resistance to defeat the Soviet occupation of the country. Military, financial and diplomatic backing was given to Islamist forces which, while forcing a Soviet withdrawal, soon organised themselves into terrorist networks ready to strike Western targets. After the jihad in Afghanistan, Britain had privy dealings of one kind or another with militants in various terrorist organisations, including Pakistan's Harkat ul-Ansar, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, and the Kosovo Liberation Army, all of which had strong links to Bin Laden's al-Qaida. Covert actions have been undertaken with these and other forces in Central Asia, North Africa and Eastern Europe.

Although my argument is that Britain has historically contributed to the development of global terrorism, the current threat to Britain is not simply 'blowback', since Whitehall's collusion with radical Islam is continuing in order to bolster the British position in the Middle East. Planners not only continue their special relationships with Riyadh and Islamabad, but they have also recently been conniving with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Islamists and their supporters in Libya. In a different way, the British are now also in effect collaborating with elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan in a desperate effort to find an exit from an increasingly disastrous war.

The roots of British collusion with radical Islam, as we will see in the first chapter, go back to the divide and rule policies promoted during the empire, when British officials regularly sought to cultivate Muslim groups or individuals to counter emerging nationalist forces challenging British hegemony. It is well known that British planners helped create the modern Middle East during and after the First World War by placing rulers in territories drawn up by British planners. But British policy also involved restoring the Caliphate, the leadership of the Muslim world, back to Saudi Arabia, where it would come under British control, a strategy which had tremendous significance for the future Saudi kingdom and the rest of the world. After the Second World War, British planners were confronted with the imminent loss of empire and the rise of two new superpowers, but were determined to maintain as much political and commercial influence in the world as possible. Although Southeast Asia and Africa were important to British planners, largely due to their raw material resources, it was the Middle East, due to its colossal oil reserves, over which London mainly wanted to exert influence. Yet here, a major enemy arose in the form of popular Arab nationalism, led by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, which sought to promote an independent foreign policy and end Middle Eastern states' reliance on the West. To contain the threat, Britain and the US not only propped up conservative, pro-Western monarchs and feudal leaders but also fomented covert relationships with Islamist forces, notably the Muslim Brotherhood, to destabilise and overthrow the nationalist governments.

As Britain withdrew its military forces from the Middle East in the late 1960s, Islamist forces such as the Saudi regime and, once again, the Muslim Brotherhood, were often seen as proxies to maintain British interests in the region, to continue to destabilise communist or nationalist regimes or as 'muscle' to bolster pro-British, right-wing governments. By the 1970s, Arab nationalism had been virtually defeated as a political force, partly thanks to Anglo-American opposition; it was largely replaced by the rising force of radical Islam, which London again often saw as a handy weapon to counter the remnants of secular nationalism and communism in key states such as Egypt and Jordan.

After the Afghanistan war in the 1980s spawned a variety of terrorist forces, including al-Qaida, terrorist atrocities began to be mounted first in Muslim countries and then, in the 1990s, in Europe and the US. Yet, crucially for this story, Britain continued to see some of these groups as useful, principally as proxy guerilla forces in places as diverse as Bosnia, Azerbaijan, Kosovo and Libya; there, they were used either to help break up the Soviet Union and secure major oil interests or to fight nationalist regimes, this time those of Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia and Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. Throughout this period, many jihadist groups and individuals found refuge in Britain, some gaining political asylum, while continuing involvement in terrorism overseas. Whitehall not only tolerated but encouraged the development of 'Londonistan' – the capital acting as a base and organising centre for numerous jihadist groups – even as this provided a de facto 'green light' to that terrorism. I suggest that some elements, at least, in the British establishment may have allowed some Islamist groups to operate from London not only because they provided information to the security services but also because they were seen as useful to British foreign policy, notably in maintaining a politically divided Middle East – a long-standing goal of imperial and postwar planners – and as a lever to influence foreign governments' policies.

Radical Islamic forces have been seen as useful to Whitehall in five specific ways: as a global counter-force to the ideologies of secular nationalism and Soviet communism, in the cases of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan; as 'conservative muscle' within countries to undermine secular nationalists and bolster pro-Western regimes; as 'shock troops' to destabilise or overthrow governments; as proxy military forces to fight wars; and as 'political tools' to leverage change from governments.

Although Britain has forged long-standing special relationships with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, it has not been in strategic alliance with radical Islam as such. Beyond these two states, Britain's policy has been to collaborate with Islamist forces as a matter of ad hoc opportunism, though it should be said that this has been rather regular. Time and again, the declassified planning documents reveal that British officials were perfectly aware that their collaborators were anti-Western and anti-imperialist, devoid of liberal social values or actually terrorists. Whitehall did not work with these forces because it agreed with them but simply because they were useful at specific moments. Islamist groups appeared to have collaborated with

Britain for the same reasons of expediency and because they shared the same hatred of popular nationalism as the British. These forces opposed British imperialism in the Middle East just as they do the current occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, but they have not generally opposed the neo-liberal economic policies pursued by the pro-Western, British-backed regimes in the region. Crucially, British collusion with radical Islam has also helped promote two big geo-strategic foreign policy objectives. The first is influence and control over key energy resources, always recognised in the British planning documents as the number one priority in the Middle East. British operations to support or side with Islamist forces have generally aimed at maintaining in power or installing governments that will promote Western-friendly oil policies.

The second objective has been maintaining Britain's place within a pro-Western global financial order. The Saudis have invested billions of dollars in the US and British economies and banking systems, and Britain and the US have similarly large investments and trade with Saudi Arabia; it is these that are being protected by the strategic alliance with Riyadh. Since the period of 1973–75, when British officials secretly made a range of deals with the Saudis to invest their oil revenues in Britain, as we shall see, there has been a tacit Anglo–American–Saudi pact to maintain this financial order, which has entailed London and Washington turning a blind eye to whatever else the Saudis spend their money on. This has been accompanied, on the Saudi side, by a strategy of bankrolling Islamist and jihadist causes and a 'Muslim' foreign policy aimed at maintaining the Saud family in power.

In promoting its strategy, Britain has routinely collaborated with the US, which has a history of similar collusion with radical Islam. Given declining British power, Anglo–American operations changed from being genuinely joint enterprises in the early postwar years to ones where Whitehall was the junior partner, often providing specialist covert forces in operations managed by Washington. At times, Britain has acted as the de facto covert arm of the US government, doing the dirty work which Washington could not, or did not want to do. This said, the British use of Muslim forces to achieve policy objectives goes back to the empire, thus predating the US. Equally, in the postwar world, Whitehall has sometimes acted independently of Washington, to pursue distinctly British interests, such as the plots to overthrow Nasser in the 1950s or the promotion of Londonistan in the 1990s.

My argument is not that radical Islam and violent jihadism are British or Western 'creations', since this would overstate Western influence in regions like the Middle East and Southeast Asia, where numerous domestic and international factors have shaped these forces over a long period. But British policy has contributed to the present threat of terrorism, although this dare not be mentioned in mainstream British culture. It is only the anti-Soviet jihad in 1980s Afghanistan that is well-known as contributing to the emergence of terrorist groups. Even here, much more attention has been paid to the covert US role than the British. As for the rest of history, there is virtually complete silence, similar to the darkness that prevails over other episodes in Britain's recent foreign policy, where less than the noblest of

intentions were in evidence. The British public has been deprived of key information to understand the roots of current terrorism and the role that government institutions, who pose as our protectors, have played in endangering us.

My understanding of Islamic radicalism is based on the definition of the widely-respected French expert, Olivier Roy, in that it involves a return of all Muslims to the true tenets of Islam (usually called 'Salafism' – 'the path of the ancestors' – or 'fundamentalism') and a political militancy that advocates jihad, in the sense of a 'holy war' against the enemies of Islam, who could include Muslim rulers. Roy defines Islamism as a brand of modern fundamentalism that seeks, through political action, to create an Islamic state by imposing Islamic ('sharia') law as the basis for all society's laws. Islamists see Islam not merely as a religion, but as a political ideology which should be integrated into all aspects of society. With this analysis in mind, throughout this book I use the terms 'radical Islamic', 'Islamist' and 'fundamentalist' interchangeably. 'Jihadists' are understood as those engaged in violent activities to achieve Islamic states.

This book results partly from several months' research at the National Archives in London, where I looked at the British declassified files on policy towards countries in the Islamic world. The research for a subject as large as this can perhaps never be exhaustive, and there are also many unknowns in British policy in some of the episodes considered here. I invite others to complete the picture in these areas.