

Today's 'Islamic Fascists' Were Yesterday's Friends

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According to President George W. Bush, America is at war with "[Islamic fascists](#)." Commentators who support Bush's military interventions also argue that the West faces new religious enemies who do not play by the old rules of warfare. [Hezbollah](#) (which literally translates as "Party of God") says its wants to obliterate Israel, and [Hamas](#) (an abbreviation of "Islamic Resistance Movement") has taken the reins of power in Gaza and the West Bank; meanwhile, [al-Qaeda](#) and its associates continue to carry out sporadic, scrappy attacks designed to restore the Islamic caliphate. All of this has led [one British newspaper columnist](#) to argue that there is a new "World War being waged by clerical fascism against free societies."

In a nutshell, the wars over state, territory, and politics that defined the Cold War era have given way to cosmic battles between "[good](#)" and "[evil](#)" – between a West apparently keen to defend secular, democratic values and its twisted opponents who prefer the idea of autocratic Islam.

This simplistic view of the new geopolitical landscape is deeply problematic. It overlooks the key role that the West played in nurturing radical Islamist groups, precisely as a means of isolating and undermining secular movements that were judged by Western governments to be too uppity or dangerous. Over the past 80 years and more – from Egypt to Afghanistan to Palestine – powerful governments in the West and their allies in the Middle East helped to create radical Islamic sects as a bulwark against secular nationalist parties or pan-Arabism. They gave the nod to, and in some instances funded and armed, Islamist movements that might challenge the claims of local anti-colonial, liberationist, or communistic outfits.

In other words, there is a deep and bitter irony in the West's current claims to be standing up to evil religious sects in the name of universal values. It was precisely the West's earlier disregard for secularism and democracy in the Middle East, its elevation of its own powerful interests over the needs and desires of local populations, which helped to give rise to a layer of apparently "evil" radical Islamism. What we have today is not a World War between a principled West and psychotic groups from "over there," but rather the messy residue of decades of Western meddling in the Middle East.

Duplicitous Western support for Islamist movements has a long and dishonorable history. In the early and middle 20th century, both British and U.S. intelligence supported the Egyptian [Muslim Brotherhood](#), the group from which so many of today's radical Islamic sects – including Hamas and even al-Qaeda – have sprung. Indeed, in the 1920s, the British, then the [colonial rulers of Egypt](#), helped to set up the Muslim Brotherhood as a means of keeping Egyptian nationalism and anti-colonialism in check. The immediate precursor to the Muslim Brotherhood was an organization called the [Society of Propaganda and Guidance](#), which was funded and backed by British colonialists. In return, the Society provided Islamist backing to

British rule in Egypt. It published a journal called *The Lighthouse*, which attacked Egyptian nationalists – who wanted British forces out of Egypt – as “atheists and infidels.” Under British patronage, the Society set up the Institute of Propaganda and Guidance, which brought Islamists from across the Muslim world to Egypt so they could be trained in political agitation, and then take such anti-anti-colonialism back to their own homelands.

One graduate of the Institute of Propaganda and Guidance was [Hassan al-Banna](#), who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. According to Robert Dreyfuss, in his informative book [Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam](#), the original Muslim Brotherhood was an “unabashed British intelligence front.” The mosque that served as the first headquarters of the Brotherhood – in Ismailia, Egypt – was built by the (British) Suez Canal Company. With Britain’s knowledge, and tacit approval, in the 1930s and ’40s the Brotherhood both challenged anti-colonial parties within Egypt and also spread to other parts of the Near and Middle East, setting up branches in Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.

Following the coming to power of the anti-colonialist and pan-Arabist Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954, elements in the West continued to look upon the Muslim Brotherhood as a weapon against secular nationalism and communism. The British government of the time encouraged the Brotherhood to challenge Nasser, and in 1954 there was open conflict between the Brotherhood’s and Nasser’s forces. Many hundreds were killed, and eventually the Brotherhood fled, taking refuge in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other states in the Anglo-American camp. The U.S.-friendly regime in Saudi Arabia, in particular, provided [sanctuary and financial backing](#) to Brotherhood members during Nasser’s crackdown on the group.

Initially the U.S., in its interventionist policies of the postwar period, adopted the British model of supporting radical Islamists in order to undermine popular secular governments or communist-influenced outfits in the Near and Middle East. This included supporting the Brotherhood against Nasser. In his book [Sleeping With the Devil](#), former CIA officer Robert Baer said there was a “dirty little secret” in Washington in the early 1950s:

“The White House looked on the Brothers as a silent ally, a secret weapon against – what else? – communism. The covert action started in the 1950s with the Dulles brothers – Allen at the CIA and John Foster at the State Department – when they approved Saudi Arabia’s funding of Egypt’s Brothers against Nasser. As far as Washington was concerned, Nasser was a communist.”

Baer said that the “logic of the Cold War” meant that the U.S. was willing to support radical Islamists even if they carried out activities such as assassinations or political agitation designed to foment conflict. As Baer argues, “If Allah agreed to fight on our side, fine. If Allah decided that political assassination was permissible, that was fine too, as long as no one talked about it in polite company.” (There was, of course, a subsequent divergence between British and American policy on Nasser. During the [Suez crisis](#) of 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower put a stop to the British-French-Israeli invasion of Suez and backed Nasser’s regime, temporarily at least.)

The Muslim Brotherhood and its various branches across the Middle East – which shared the aim of replacing secular democracy with Islamic government – also gave rise to violent splinter groups. Hamas, which today is discussed by Bush and his supporters as a great danger to peace in Israel-Palestine, if not the entire world, is a local wing of the

Brotherhood, formed in the mid-1980s from various Brotherhood-affiliated charities that had gained a foothold in Palestinian territories. Al-Qaeda itself has been influenced primarily by the thinking of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), a radical member of the Brotherhood. Osama bin Laden's deputy, [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#), an Egyptian, was first radicalized by the Muslim Brotherhood; he joined the group when he was 14 years old, before moving on to the more radical Islamic Jihad group in 1979 and subsequently fighting against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Indeed, during the Afghan-Soviet war from 1979 to 1992, American and British intelligence once again supported radical Islamists against, in this instance, secularist and communist forces. Where the Cold War began with America and Britain supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical Islamists against popular secular movements, it ended with America and Britain arming, financing, and propagandizing on behalf of radical Islamists fighting the Soviet Union's last stand in Afghanistan before its collapse in the early 1990s.

Throughout the 1980s, the CIA and the British intelligence organization MI5 arranged for the arming and training of thousands of mujahedeen in Afghanistan. American and British elements, together with Saudi Arabia and the Pakistani intelligence service ISI, ensured that the mujahedeen had everything they needed to wage war against the Soviets. As [Phil Gasper](#) has argued,

"The CIA became the grand coordinator: purchasing or arranging the manufacture of Soviet-style weapons from Egypt, China, Poland, Israel, and elsewhere, or supplying their own; arranging for military training by Americans, Egyptians, Chinese and Iranians; hitting up Middle-Eastern countries for donations, notably Saudi Arabia, which gave many hundreds of millions of dollars in aid each year, totaling probably more than a billion; pressuring and bribing Pakistan – with whom recent American relations had been very poor – to rent out its country as a military staging area and sanctuary; putting the Pakistan Director of Military Operations, Brigadier Mian Mohammad Afzal, onto the CIA payroll to ensure Pakistani cooperation."

Two beneficiaries of such widespread American support for the mujahedeen's war against the Soviets were bin Laden and Zawahiri, currently al-Qaeda's number 1 and number 2. Both traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1980s to assist with the anti-Soviet war effort. It should be noted that America and Britain did not only fund and arm the mujahedeen; they also provided backing to mosques, madrassa schools, and propagandistic publications and radio stations that put the case for political Islam over communism or secularism. Indeed, [Khalid Sheikh Mohammed](#) – who would go on to devise the 9/11 attacks – was involved in a madrassa school that was funded by Saudi and U.S. money. Once again, Western forces were not only opportunistically supporting their enemy's enemy – they were also fueling the idea that radical Islamism was preferable to "evil" communism and even to secular government.

We could argue that al-Qaeda, both intellectually and practically, is a product of Western meddling in Middle Eastern affairs. It takes its inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood, that group supported by both American and British intelligence in the early and middle 20th century, and it was forged in the heat of the Afghan-Soviet war, that conflict largely facilitated by U.S., British, and Saudi funds and arms. In terms of both its political origins and its early and formative fighting experiences, al-Qaeda owes a great deal to Western interventionism.

Even Hamas is, in some ways, the product of a desire by the West and its allies to use radical Islamism as a counterweight to popular secular movements. It was formed, in 1987, from various charities with links to the Muslim Brotherhood. These charities had been allowed by Israel itself to gain strength and influence in Palestinian territories in order to, as one account puts it, “counter the influence of the secular Palestinian resistance movements.” Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, who was [killed by an Israeli air strike](#) in 2004, formed the military outfit in 1987 as the armed wing of his group the Islamic Association. This organization had been [licensed by Israel](#) 10 years earlier, in the 1970s. In that period, Israeli officials gave the nod to, and even indirectly funded, the setting-up of Islamic societies in the West Bank and Gaza that might weaken and isolate Yasser Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization. [Martha Kessler](#), a senior analyst for the CIA, has said: “[W]e saw Israel cultivate Islam as a counterweight to Palestinian nationalism.” The very Islamic groups “cultivated” by Israel in the 1970s went on to become Hamas in the 1980s.

In funding Islamists against secularists, Israel was following in a long tradition started by the British and Americans. As one former [senior CIA official](#) has put it, Israel’s tolerance, even support, of Islamic groups that would later become Hamas “was a direct attempt to divide and dilute support for a strong, secular PLO by using a competing religious alternative.” There is no evidence that Israel ever supported Hezbollah, but their interests have coincided over the past two decades or more, since the founding of Hezbollah in Lebanon by Iranian elements in 1982.

As [Strategic Forecasting Inc.](#), or Stratfor, has argued, “Hezbollah represented a militant, non-secular alternative to [Arafat’s] Nassertie Fatah, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and other groups that took their bearing from Pan-Arabism rather than Islam.... [Hezbollah] made a powerful claim that the Palestinian movement had no future while it remained fundamentally secular.” Israel and Hezbollah are, of course, arch-rivals; Hezbollah was formed with the explicit aim of expelling Israel from Lebanon by any means necessary. However, in the early 1980s both Israel and Hezbollah had a shared aim of weakening the more powerful and popular secularist Palestinian movements.

Over the past 80 years, Western governments and their allies have supported radical Islamist groups. However, this was not merely opportunism, a bad case of “my enemy’s enemy is my friend.” As part of this process, Western governments seriously denigrated popular secular and democratic movements. Indeed, from the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1920s to Israel’s role in the forging of Hamas in the 1980s, the explicit aim of Western support for radical Islamism was to isolate, weaken, and ultimately destroy popular political movements that very often were based on Western ideas of democracy and progress. Thus, many of these radical Islamist groups – the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah – have a built-in suspicion of and hostility toward secular democracy.

What we are faced with today is not a new World War being waged by any kind of powerful Islamist conspiracy. Instead, as secular and nationalist politics has fallen apart in the post-Cold War period, we are left with fairly small, radical Islamist sects – in other words, with those very groups that were forged as a bulwark against secular democratic politics in the first place.

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