

UK's collusion with radical Islam: Bin Laden, the Taliban, Zawahiri: Britain's Done Business With Them All

Five years after the 7/7 bombings in London

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When the London bombers struck five years ago, many people blamed the invasion of Iraq for inspiring them. But the connection between 7/7 and British foreign policy goes much deeper. The terrorist threat to Britain is partly “blowback”, resulting from a web of British covert operations with militant Islamist groups stretching back decades. And while terrorism is held up as the country’s biggest security challenge, Whitehall’s collusion with radical Islam is continuing.

Two of the four London bombers were trained in Pakistani camps run by the Harkat ul-Mujahideen (HUM) terrorist group, which has long been sponsored by Pakistan to fight Indian forces in Kashmir. Britain not only arms and trains Pakistan but in the past provided covert aid benefiting the HUM. There are credible suggestions that Britain facilitated the dispatch of HUM volunteers to fight in Yugoslavia and Kosovo in the 90s. Earlier, MI6’s covert war in Afghanistan involved the [military training of various Islamist groups to counter the Soviet occupation of the country](#). Many HUM militants were instructed by an insurgent faction that Britain was covertly training and arming with anti-aircraft missiles.

One of that faction’s warlords was Jalalludin Haqqani, who is now the Taliban’s overall military commander fighting the British; his past is not something the Ministry of Defence relates to the young soldiers deployed to Helmand province. Another old friend is the Afghan commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, known as a ruthless killer, who was given covert aid and training in the 1980s and was even received by officials in Whitehall. It was Hekmatyar who Britain backed to conduct secret operations inside the Muslim republics of the Soviet Union.

The further twist is that Britain is now reliant on doing a deal with these forces to secure something more than a humiliating exit from the increasingly brutal war in Afghanistan. The stakes are exceedingly high – General Sir David Richards, the head of the British army, has said that the “UK’s authority and reputation in the world” are on the line in Afghanistan. He also remarked last week that [talks should be held with the Taliban “pretty soon”](#).

In fact, Whitehall has been desperately trying to do a deal with the Taliban since at least 2004, when it is claimed that [Maulana Fazlur Rahman](#), a radical pro-Taliban cleric in Pakistan, was invited to visit the Foreign Office. Rahman told the Pakistani media that “Britain is holding indirect talks with the Taliban militia to seek an honourable American exit from Afghanistan”.

This dependence on militant Islamists to achieve foreign policy objectives is an echo of the past, when such collusion was aimed at controlling oil resources and overthrowing nationalist governments. The Anglo-American operation in Iran in 1953 to remove the popular Mossadeq government, which had nationalised British oil operations, involved plotting with [Ayatollah Seyyed Kashani](#), the founder of the militant fundamentalist group Devotees of Islam. MI6 and the CIA financed demonstrations against Mossadeq, and even discussed installing Kashani – a predecessor of Ayatollah Khomeini – as Iran’s leader after the coup. The Foreign Office noted that in power Kashani “would conceivably accept western money”, but viewed him as “a complete political reactionary”, and therefore not reliable as a long-term asset.

Also targeted was Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, who in 1952 overthrew the pro-British King Farouk, providing an Arab nationalist alternative to the pro-western monarchies in the Middle East. Britain had first covertly funded the Muslim Brotherhood, a new radical force with a terrorist wing, in 1942, and further links were made with the organisation after Nasser’s revolution. By 1956, when Britain invaded Egypt, contacts were developed as part of plans to overthrow Nasser. Indeed, the invasion was undertaken in the knowledge that the Muslim Brotherhood might form the new regime. After [Nasser died in 1970](#), and the pro-western president Anwar Sadat secretly sponsored militant Islamist cells to counter nationalists and communists, British officials were still describing the Brotherhood as “a potentially handy weapon” for the regime.

Declassified files reveal that planners recognised their Islamist collaborators as anti-western, but entered into marriages of convenience to achieve short-term objectives. As British power waned in the Middle East, Whitehall sought out all the allies it could find, with little regard for the long-term consequences. Britain’s role in the emergence of global terrorism should not be exaggerated, but there are many contributions: opposition to Arab nationalism, which paved the way for the rise of radical Islam in the 1970s; support for the Afghan holy warriors in the 1980s, from which emerged Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaida; and the phenomenon of “Londonistan” in the 1990s, when the capital became an organising centre for global jihad, tolerated by the authorities.

But Whitehall’s view of Islamist militants as handy weapons or shock troops is far from historical. In 1999, during Nato’s bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, the Blair government secretly trained fighters in the Kosovo Liberation Army to act as Nato’s soldiers on the ground. The KLA was openly described by ministers as a terrorist organisation, and worked closely with al-Qaida fighters who joined the Muslim cause; their military centre was in the same camp network in Kosovo and Albania where the SAS were providing training. One KLA unit was led by the brother of Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden’s right-hand man. This murky feature of Blair’s “humanitarian intervention” remains conveniently overlooked in most accounts of the war.

The attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 have made Britain revise but not end its secret affair with radical Islam. In the occupation of southern Iraq, Britain’s weak position led to conniving with Shia militias. Liberal, secular forces were bypassed after the invasion, and when Britain withdrew its combat forces it in effect handed responsibility for “security” to these militias. The irony is that Britain’s favoured collaborator, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, has long been Iran’s favoured vehicle for its policy in Iraq. Britain also continues its deep alliance with a Pakistan that is the main protector of the Taliban, and does little to press Islamabad to end its support for the jihad in Kashmir. Thus, in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Whitehall has been in the bizarre situation of being allied to its enemy.

Militants may be serving other useful functions. The then Foreign Office minister Kim Howells told a parliamentary inquiry in March 2007: "At dinners at embassies around the world I have suddenly discovered that somebody happens to be sitting next to me who is from the respectable end of a death squad from somewhere. The ambassador has, with the best will in the world, invited that person along because he thinks that, under the new democracy, they will become the new government."

The government says it has prevented 12 bomb plots in the last decade and that we face a threat from 200 networks. My concern is that the wards of state pledging to protect us have neither accounted for "blowback" nor stopped contributing to it. Governments guided by morals would have different priorities and would discontinue policies based on interests that endanger us and much of the world.

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