

## **Modern Islamic Fundamentalism**

A closer look at a neglected history

By Radical Randy

So, have you got your red shirt all washed and ready for Friday? Stephen Harper is counting on you to stand up and support our troops as they defend us against the radical Islamic menace. Oh, and secure a natural gas corridor for a pipeline through Kandahar.

South of the border the Bush administration, aided by American corporate media, directs its belligerent rhetoric and thinly veiled threats against another oil rich, unfriendly Middle Eastern Muslim country because it could – *possibly* – be developing weapons of mass destruction. Of course the last thing the world needs is another country with nuclear weapons, but the Americans' own National Intelligence Estimate of 2007 stated that Iran suspended its weapons program in 2003, with no indication of resumption. They claim Iran's nuclear program is a threat to Israel, despite the fact that Israel is believed to have more than 100 nuclear weapons. The U.S. government is also in a huff over militant Iran's meddling in Iraqi internal affairs (insert joke here). Meanwhile, corporate media fulfills its role by presenting random, bearded jihadis jumping up and down shrieking "Death to America" – completely out of context. To viewers, it appears an unjustified rage. But by examining recent history, we see that there are many reasons behind the recent growth of militancy in the Islamic world. In fact, in many ways, it has been manufactured by the West.

### **America's special friend**

Saudi Arabia, the keystone of U.S. power in the Middle East, is a major centre for Islamic extremism. The royal House of Saud maintains power through a centuries-old alliance with the ultra-conservative Wahhabi sect. The government enforces strict Sharia religious law including denying basic rights to their female population. It also supports militant Islamic groups such as Hamas.

As Linda McQuaig notes in *It's The Crude, Dude*, since the end of World War II the U.S. government has maintained a "special relationship" with the royal Saudis. The Americans get access to the world's largest conventional oil reserves, and input on oil policy, from U.S. consortium Aramco. In return, America sells billions of dollars in weaponry to the country. Saudi Arabia has used some of its oil wealth to export Islamic fundamentalism, sponsoring Wahhabi mosques in Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the U.S. The widespread hatred of U.S. influence, amplified while the Americans had troops stationed in Arabia, was reflected in the fact that 15 of the 19 9/11 hijackers were Saudis. Additionally, their countrymen made up the largest segment of fighters captured in Afghanistan and shipped to the Guantanamo Bay prison.

## **A new enemy mysteriously appears**

Now for a look at America's boogeyman *du jour*. Iran in the early 1950's had exactly the kind of honest, democratic government the West claims to admire. However its prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, made the mistake of attempting to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (forerunner of British Petroleum) with compensation to the Brits. The British were expelled after their plots to overthrow Mossadegh became known, so they turned to the U.S. President Eisenhower authorized the CIA, in what became the first of many such operations around the world, to do the job. In 1953, they sent in Kermit Roosevelt to orchestrate the coup. Mossadegh was arrested, imprisoned, and replaced by the U.S. puppet Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

The hated Shah was propped up by the Americans, whose oil companies he served well, along with those of the British. He ruled for over a quarter century, kept in power by the torture and murder of political opponents, suppression of the press and political parties, and limiting public gatherings to mosques and religious schools. When the bubbling rage against this despot finally resulted in his 1979 overthrow, it wasn't difficult for the clerics to usurp control from the revolutionary forces.

## **Secular nationalism derailed**

Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser represented the blueprint for a successful secular future for the modern Muslim world. In 1956 he nationalized the Suez Canal, Egypt's major resource. Israel along with the old imperial powers of England and France attacked Egypt. A cease-fire was implemented with U.N. monitoring. Nasser followed this by nationalizing foreign financial companies, becoming a hero to the people of the Muslim countries and the rest of the developing world.

The secular nationalism of Mossadegh and Nasser should have been the template for a transition by the other Islamic nations from former colonial subservience to modern nationhood. The Western powers could have encouraged independent governments with basic liberal democratic principles.

Instead, as writer/activist Noam Chomsky has observed, the countries of the developed world sought to undermine Nasser. The U.S. worked with Egypt's fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood against him. Their conservative Saudi allies also tried to erode his influence. Egypt's 1967 defeat by Israel in the Six Day War left Nasser's attempt at nationalization in ruins and destroyed his dream of pan-Arab unity. With secular nationalism eliminated as an alternative the Islamic world was left with the choice between economic neocolonial subjugation to the West or a turn away from failed modernism to a medieval fundamentalist mindset.

## **How to lose friends and alienate people: invasion and occupation**

Israel's victory in the 1967 war demonstrated its regional strength and led to closer ties to the U.S., for which it often acted as a military proxy. The American government

continues to support it in an almost unconditional manner, both as a major military foreign aid recipient and by vetoing U.N. Security Council resolutions critical of Israel. Of course, Israel has legitimate security concerns, but this often becomes a license for excess, as in its 2006 invasion and devastation of southern Lebanon. And, as Chomsky noted in *What We Say Goes*, Israel's elimination of the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization left a power vacuum that was filled by the religiously militant Hamas.

Bush's carefully manufactured Iraqi oil war has led to further gains for the fundamentalists. Former American ally Saddam Hussein ran a very modern secular state with high literacy rates, a regime that was antithetical to al-Qaeda and the fundamentalists. Simmering sectarian splits were kept from igniting under this dictator's brutal rule. As Naomi Klein details in *The Shock Doctrine*, one year after the invasion, a majority of Iraqis favoured a non-religious government, but after six months of occupation, most preferred Islamic law. They had experienced the denial of grassroots, democratic self-rule and brutal treatment of civilians. The resulting anger manifested as increasing religious fanaticism and violence. Essentially, the illegal American led invasion transformed a stable, secular state into a chaotic breeding ground for religious fanatics, terrorists, and private militias such as Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. The net result may be a shattered theocratic state rising from the ruins, exporting fundamentalist terrorism throughout the region and around the world. Ironically, the born-again George W. Bush, backed by Christian fundamentalists, has done more to spread Muslim fundamentalism than Islamic terrorists could have dreamed.

### **It seemed like a good idea at the time...**

Speaking of Bin Laden and his crew, the origin of al-Qaeda is no great mystery, except apparently to the American public. In the late '70s, a pro-Soviet Afghan regime was carrying out economic and social reforms, including promoting women's rights and female literacy. They were opposed by the conservative mujahideen holy warriors. The Carter Administration thought it would be swell to covertly supply these rebels with arms, via neighbouring Pakistan. They hoped the resulting civil war would trigger their Soviet rival to invade in support of the government, thereby blundering into their own Vietnam quagmire. The Russians obliged in 1979 and what followed was the largest CIA operation in its history. As Stephen Kinzer describes in *Overthrow*, the Americans overlooked the clandestine nuclear weapons program of their favourite new ally in the area, Pakistan's dictator General Zia al-Huq, as well as his desire to bring a "genuine Islamic order" to his country. Massive weapons shipments flowed to the rebels, but were required to be channeled through the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI), Pakistan's military intelligence division. It armed seven Afghan factions, all of which were fundamentalist and anti-Western, while undermining leftist, secular, or nationalist rebel groups. The aid continued under the Reagan presidency with billions of dollars of funding. This contribution was matched by the Saudis, who had also been providing money and religious teachers to set up fundamentalist Wahhabi madrassa schools in Pakistan. The ISI recruited militants from many Muslim countries for the jihad holy war, training them to use hand weapons and to make and plant bombs. Among the thousands

of Saudis who flooded in to join the fight was the young millionaire, Osama bin Laden. By the late '80s, he was busily constructing jihadi bases in Afghanistan.

In 1989, the Red Army withdrew. The Afghan government the Russians left in charge collapsed in civil war and warlords took power. No longer needing its former friends, the U.S. abandoned the mujahideen, deeply angering them. Pakistani-trained talib religious students defeated the warlords with covert aid from the CIA and gained control of Afghanistan as the ultra-conservative Taliban government. Some of them had been trained in the CIA sponsored camps and radicalized by the fundamentalism the agency encouraged. In 1996, bin Laden returned from Sudan to establish training camps for militants in Afghanistan. The Americans maintained good relations with the Taliban, with token protests regarding their denial of rights for women. Unocal, a U.S. oil company, wanted to build a natural gas pipeline through the country. Priorities must be observed.

Following the U.S. led 2001 invasion a new government was set up in this ravaged country. As journalist Kathy Gannon reports in *I is for Infidel* several of its new members were the very warlords who had brought bin Laden back to Afghanistan. Their militiamen, whom the U.S. expected to hunt down Bin Laden and the rest of the al-Qaeda leadership, instead allowed them to escape to Pakistan. Many of the Taliban fighters continue to freely melt back and forth through the border area. So much for Bush's "war on terror." Meanwhile, Canadian troops continue to fight and die in a futile effort to clean up another American foreign policy disaster.

### **And the blowback continues...**

The firestorm of Islamic extremism the U.S. and its allies ignited in Afghanistan has spread far beyond the Middle East. Hundreds of those who came to fight were from Southeast Asia and when they returned to the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore many continued their militant jihad, including setting up their own training camps. Al-Qaeda has also infiltrated and co-opted homegrown groups in the area and converted them to its Muslim extremist agenda. The U.S. continued to be industrious during the '90s, secretly arming and funding Islamic terrorist networks in the Balkans and Chechnya.

The rage many Pakistanis felt at the Western invasion of a neighbouring Muslim nation led to significant gains for fundamentalist politicians in its 2002 provincial and national elections in a country where they previously hadn't been a force. Additionally, many military officers of America's nuclear-armed ally have come under fundamentalist influence.

The United States and other Western powers, busily overthrowing secular nationalistic states, backing jihadis, and invading Muslim countries, couldn't have promoted Islamic extremism any better if they'd tried. This preoccupation with short-sighted geopolitical goals, often under the pretext of "fighting communism" and greater corporate profits, have turned opportunities for true nation-building into the current disaster parade.

Fundamentalist “free market” capitalism has played its role in the modern revival and propagation of fundamentalist Islam. As part of its post-9/11 efforts to fight terrorists, the U.S. provided aid to brutal thugs such as Uzbekistan’s President Karimov, notorious for boiling Muslim prisoners alive. The fundamentalist whirlwind the U.S. and others have helped to unleash may take decades to die down, even with a new, less bellicose administration in Washington. In the wake of 9/11, Bush’s disingenuous “Why do they hate us?” perhaps begs the obvious reply: “Why wouldn’t they?”

Further reading:

Books:

Tariq Ali’s *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*

William Blum’s *Killing Hope*

Documentaries:

*Reinventing the Taliban?*

*The Oil Factor*