Secret Affairs: Britain's Collusion with Radical Islam

Mark Curtis

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This book deals with the old-new issue pertaining to the dialectics of Western, particularly the British"Islamists" collusion during the decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. The issue is old because much of such collaboration has been either known or suspected, especially during the era of the visible rise of threatening communist ideology since the Russian Revolution of 1917, as well as other socialist ideas. It is new because of the twists it has taken in the context of the sudden disappearance of the common Soviet ideological enemy, which had glued both parties to each other—and the ensuing so-called war on global terrorism. The issue is also dialectical as it pertains to the seeming love-hate relationship that permeated Western-Islamist interaction, and which despite all soundings of mutual vituperations and appearances of alleged resentment, never really stood in the way of both finding reasons and ways for colluding.

Curtis's interesting book traces the roots and intricacies of this complex relationship and sheds illuminating light on its ironies.

The contention of the book is simple and straightforward. Britain's links with Islamist groups and activists go back to the early decades of the twentieth century when its officials sought to "cultivate Muslim groups or individuals" (xiv) to counter growing challenges by emerging nationalist currents. This approach was based on the principle of divide and rule. Collusion is still ongoing, and as such, "Britain has historically contributed to the development of global terrorism . . . " (xiii–xiv) as the world has recently come to experience it.

Within this thematic frame, Curtis proceeds to elaborate how Britain has colluded with "two sets of Islamic actors": on the one hand, the partly British-created states of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan—and on the other, groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (1928) to which it extended funds as far back as 1941 (56) if not earlier, Jamaat-i-Islami (Islamic Party) founded in British India in 1941, Darul Islam (House of Islam) in Indonesia, as well as with more recent jihadist groups (xi–xiii). Relations with these diverse factions ranged from the permanent and strategic to the temporary and convenient as "proxies" through which to maintain British regional influence and to preserve its national interests (xv). In fact, as Curtis points out, Britain at one time had toyed with the idea of restoring the "Caliphate" and placing it in the hands of the "Saudi Arabia . . . where it would come under British control" (xiv).

Engaging the current Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was further seen as a means to employ them to challenge the "grass roots . . . perception of the West" (308). In this light, for example, one can perceive the connection between elements of the British government with no less a figure than Shaikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Curtis indicates that the invitation accorded to Qaradawi by London's mayor Ken Livingstone in 2004, was part of the collaboration policy with the Islamist right to achieve "key British foreign policy goals" (306). In fact, one adviser to the Foreign Office argued that "Qaradawi's visit might be useful 'given his influence in relation to our foreign policy objectives'" (398n34). In July 2006 Qaradawi was invited to a conference on Muslims in Europe in Istanbul with his expenses being paid by the Foreign Office (399n34; see also 399n35). The outcome of such a long-term relationship bore fruit a few years later in 2011 when Qaradawi was recruited—directly or indirectly through the Qatari regime—to serve British/Western foreign policy; one example is Qaradawi's fatwa against the present-day Syrian regime, another his earlier fatwa on Al-Jazeera to kill Qadafi.

The Syrian branch of the Brotherhood was also seen as a "tool to pressure and destabilize" the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad as well as of "bolstering the likelihood of a possible successor regime and making contacts with key figures in it" (309). Collaboration with the Syrian Brotherhood, which had intensified since the early 2000s—as well as Britain's (and the United States') position vis-a-vis the Syrian regime—seemed to be dependent on the continued or changing stance of Syria regarding its alliance with Iran (310). All this was not a far cry from the British-Muslim Brotherhood collusion in the 1950s to overthrow Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (313). As Curtis put it, Britain's current engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood was nothing more than the continuation of the "Whitehall's use of the Islamist right as a tool in its foreign policy" (313).

What the groups discussed above did or committed were of less concern, even when they appeared to be aiming at Western targets, to the extent that they continued to serve such goals and objectives. Curtis speculates that the British government continues to tolerate such Islamist groups in the country in order to benefit from them as sources of "information,"` to use them as divisive forces that would help keep the Middle East politically divided, and as a lever to influence policies of governments in the region (xv, 307–309). British officials after all could always make a clear distinction between possible tactical setbacks taken in favor of long-term strategic payoffs.

The nineteen chapters of this book are basically melancholic variations on the above theme. They deal with collaboration and collusion in different parts of the world against anti-Western regimes or countries. This ranged from manipulating Pakistan and Afghanistan against the USSR (chapters 8 and 11)—including nurturing al-Qaida (chapter 10) to establishing contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1950s at the very time that Nasser was negotiating British evacuation from Egypt so as to weaken his hand and if possible to overthrow him (chapter 3; 59); the CIA-funded King Hussain of Jordan supporting the Muslim Brotherhood against Hafez Assad's regime in the 1980s in return for their earlier support in 1970 against the Palestinian resistance (chapter 6; 102–103); and collusion in order to kill Qadafi and overthrow Saddam Hussain (chapter 13). This was to take place in other domains of intrigue when the Saudis for instance would assure the Americans that they shall keep a close eye on religious militants entering Iraq in order to make sure "if they are going to 'throw bombs' it will be at Hezbollah, Iran and the Syrians, and not the US forces" (316).

This book is a well–documented piece of work, which both exposes as well as shatters myths on both ends of the colluding parties, not least of which are the self-indulging claims about holding some kind of a moral

high ground. Most importantly, published before the so-called Arab Spring, it provides a solid background that helps explain what is taking place currently in the Arab world as such collusion persists and may be expected to intensify, and as so-called Islamist groups as well as Gulf countries conventionally carry on being nothing more than Western foreign policy tools.

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