
Book Review

Our Sordid Love Affair With London's Muslim Brotherhood

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam

by Robert Dreyfuss

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This reviewer recently attended a conference at the U.S. Senate, which was billed as a symposium of experts on al-Qaeda. I asked a panel of three of the leading “experts” about the links between al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, and I mentioned that the staff reports of the 9/11 Commission had noted that the purported mastermind of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, had been captured, and had boasted that he had been recruited to the Muslim Brotherhood at the age of 16. The question drew blank stares from the self-professed al-Qaeda experts, and none chose to answer. In fairness, one of the three approached me afterwards, to say that he did know something about the Brotherhood ties to al-Qaeda, but he felt that the audience, made up of senior Congressional staffers and think-tank policy wonks, was incapable of understanding the complicated answer he would have had to give.

The incident offers a telling snapshot of the state of affairs among so-called terrorism experts, many of whom boast of degrees in sociology, psychology, and computer science. Few have a grasp of history, and even fewer attempt to draw the lessons of history in peddling their dubious expertise. When I recounted the incident at the terrorism symposium to several retired military and intelligence officers who do have credentials as Middle East specialists, they shook their heads in pained acknowledgement of the problem.

Fortunately, author Robert Dreyfuss has provided a timely work that offers some relief to this major deficiency in our so-called Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) in particular, and American diplomacy and intelligence operations in general. *Devil's Game* provides a vivid picture of how the United States has spent the last century being dragged into a Middle

East quagmire by a British imperial apparatus that has sponsored and manipulated Islamic fundamentalism, since the first hours of the era of petroleum politics at the end of the 19th Century. Dreyfuss's work combines a careful and thoroughly readable survey of the major academic literature on the history of the Muslim Brotherhood and its various 20th-Century offshoots, with interviews with some of America's senior Middle East

diplomats and intelligence officers. In his introductory chapter, Dreyfuss offers a diagnosis and remedy to the Bush Administration's misguided GWOT. “A war on terrorism,” Dreyfuss writes, “is precisely the wrong way to deal with the challenge posed by political Islam. That challenge comes in two forms. First, there is the specific threat to the safety and security of Americans posed by al-Qaeda; and second, there is a far broader political problem created by the growth of the Islamic right in the Middle East and South Asia.” He continues, “In regard to al-Qaeda, the Bush administration has willfully exaggerated the size of the threat it represents. It is not an all-powerful organization. . . . Using the U.S. military in conventional war mode is not the way to attack al-Qaeda, which is primarily a problem for intelligence and law enforcement. The war in Afghanistan was wrongheaded; it failed to destroy al-Qaeda's leadership, it failed to destroy the Taliban, which scattered, and it failed to stabilize that war-torn nation more than temporarily, creating a weak central government at the mercy of warlords and former Taliban gangs. Worse, the war in Iraq was not only misguided and unnecessary, but it was aimed at a nation that had absolutely no links to bin Laden's gang—as if, said an observer, FDR had attacked Mexico in response to Pearl Harbor. . . . A problem that could have been dealt with surgically—using commandos and Special Forces, aided by tough-minded diplo-



macy, indictments and legal action, concerted international efforts, and judicious self-defense measures—was vastly inflated by the Bush administration.”

On the broader issue of the rise of the Islamist right wing, Dreyfuss writes, “First, the United States must do what it can to remove the grievances that cause angry Muslims to seek solace in organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood. . . . At the very least, the United States can take important steps that can weaken the ability of the Islamic right to harvest recruits. By joining with the UN, the Europeans, and Russia, the United States can help settle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in a manner that guarantees justice for the Palestinians; an independent state that is geographically and economically viable, tied to the withdrawal of illegal Israeli settlements, an Israeli return roughly to its 1967 borders, and a stable and equitable division of Jerusalem. That, more than any other action, would remove a global *casus belli* for the Islamic right. Second, the United States must abandon its imperial pretensions in the Middle East. That will require a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and Iraq, the dismantling of U.S. military bases in the Persian Gulf and facilities in Saudi Arabia, and a sharp reduction in the visibility of the U.S. Navy, military training missions, and arms sales.”

Dreyfuss’s common-sense recipes for rolling back the advances of the Islamic right are useful. But the real strength of *Devil’s Game* is the carefully documented history of Britain’s sponsorship of the Muslim Brotherhood, and America’s blundering responses, which leaves the world on the edge of precisely the “Clash of Civilizations” perpetual war that London has always pursued, and which the United States has traditionally opposed.

Britain’s Imperial Synarchy

Although the Muslim Brotherhood was formally launched in Egypt in 1928, the roots of the British-sponsored Freemasonic secret society date further back two generations, to the last quarter of the 19th Century. At that time, British intelligence sponsored the career of a Persian-born Shi’ite named Jamal Eddine, later known as **Jamal Eddine al-Afghani** (1838-97). A British (and French) Freemason and a professed atheist, al-Afghani spent his entire adult life as an agent of British intelligence, fomenting “Islamist” insurrections where they suited British imperial goals. At points in his fascinating career, he served as Minister of War and Prime Minister of Iran, before leading an insurrection against the Shah. He was a founder of the Young Egypt movement, which was part of a worldwide network of British Jacobin fronts that waged war against Britain’s imperial rivals during the second half of the 19th Century. In Sudan, following the Mahdi-led nationalist revolt and the murder of Britain’s Lord Gordon, al-Afghani organized an “Islamist” counterrevolution in support of a restoration of British colonial control.

In the finest “Venetian” tradition, al-Afghani promoted a doctrine of “economy of truth”—i.e., truth as an instrument



Jamal Eddine al-Afghani, a Freemason and atheist, spent his entire career as a British intelligence agent, fomenting “Islamist” insurrections.

of imperial intrigues. He adopted the name “al-Afghani” to conceal his Persian birth and his Shi’ite Muslim roots, to better serve his British handlers in the largely Sunni regions where he operated. He also spoke cynically of “the social utility of religion.”

Al-Afghani was backed by one of Britain’s leading Orientalists, Edward Granville Browne, and whenever he ran out of cash, he made a bee-line for London, where he was always provided with funding, a publishing house, and other amenities.

Al-Afghani’s leading disciple and fellow British agent was **Mohammed Abduh** (1849-1905). The Egyptian-born Abduh founded the Salafiyya movement, under the patronage of the British proconsul of Egypt, Evelyn Baring (Lord Cromer). In the 1870s, al-Afghani and Abduh founded the Young Egypt movement, which battled against secular Egyptian nationalists. In the mid-1880s, the two men moved to Paris, where they launched a magazine under British and French Freemasonic sponsorship, called *Indissoluble Bond*. There are some accounts of al-Afghani’s and Abduh’s three years in Paris that suggest that they were in direct contact with St. Yves d’Alveydre, the founder of the Synarchist movement. From Paris, the duo returned to London.

In 1899, two years after al-Afghani died, Lord Cromer made Abduh the Grand Mufti of Egypt. Abduh in turn, begat **Mohammed Rashid Rida** (1865-1935), a Syrian who migrated to Egypt to become Abduh’s leading disciple. Rida founded the organization that would be the immediate precursor to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Society of Propaganda and Guidance. That Freemasonic organization published a journal, *The Lighthouse*, which provided “Islamist” backing to the British colonial rule over Egypt, by attacking Egyptian nationalists as “atheists and infidels.” In Cairo, under British patronage, Rida launched the Institute of Propaganda and Guidance, which brought in Islamists from every part of the



Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, as an unabashed British front group.

Muslim world to be trained in political agitation. Rida and other disciples of Abduh founded the People's Party, which openly agitated in support of British colonial rule.

One graduate of the Institute for Propaganda and Guidance, who also was a central figure in the People's Party was **Hassan al-Banna** (1906-49). Al-Banna would found the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. The original Muslim Brotherhood was an unabashed British intelligence front. The mosque in Ismailia, Egypt, which was the first headquarters of the Brotherhood, was built by the (British) Suez Canal Company, nearby a British World War I military base. During World War II, the Muslim Brotherhood functioned as a de facto branch of the British military. In 1942, the Brotherhood created the "Secret Apparatus," an underground paramilitary organization that specialized in assassinations and espionage.

Hitler's and London's Grand Mufti

During the formative years of the Muslim Brotherhood, the British colonial apparatus of the Arab Bureau was simultaneously promoting the career of another "Islamist" named **Haj Amin al-Husseini**. A notorious anti-Semite with little Islamic theological training, al-Husseini was promoted by **Sir Ronald Storrs**, the British Governor General and an aide to Sir Herbert Samuel, the British High Commissioner for Palestine. In 1921 al-Husseini had already been installed as president of the Supreme Muslim Council, a British-sponsored association of hand-picked Muslim religious leaders. The next year, Sir Ronald Storrs rigged the "elections" for the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem in favor of al-Husseini.

At the outbreak of World War II, al-Husseini, who had been paired up with al-Banna, fled Jerusalem and wound up in Berlin as a propagandist for the Nazi assault against the Jews. In spite of his ostensible betrayal of Britain, at the close of World War II, al-Husseini was back in the Holy Land, again on the British intelligence payroll, this time as a firebrand anti-communist propagandist for the Near East Broadcasting Station. Al-Husseini would remain a fixture of British right-wing Islamist machinations in the Near East for the rest of his life, offering refuge to wartime Nazis who had been recruited to British intelligence and dispatched to the region as experi-

enced anti-communists.

Hassan al-Banna was assassinated in 1949 by Egyptian security agents. But by that time, the Muslim Brotherhood had vastly expanded its ranks, and had spread to other parts of the Near East, where the British had a major postwar presence. Al-Banna was replaced as titular head of the Brotherhood by his son-in-law, **Said Ramadan**. Ramadan had travelled throughout the Near East, prior to al-Banna's assassination, establishing branches of the Muslim Brotherhood. In Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, Ramadan successfully launched branches. It is estimated that, by 1947, the Brotherhood had over 25,000 members in Palestine alone, with numbers involved in underground paramilitary formations.

British Brains and American Brawn

The untimely death of Franklin Roosevelt in April 1945 offered London the opportunity to shape the postwar global political landscape. Winston Churchill's famous "Iron Curtain" address defined the Cold War and forged an Anglo-American partnership that Churchill once described in the observation: "With British brains and American brawn, we can rule the world."

Thus began an Anglo-American collusion with the Muslim Brotherhood and spinoff right-wing Islamist agencies, under the banner of fighting Godless communism. Unfortunately, often American policymakers, under British sway, mistook legitimate nationalist movements in the Arab world for Soviet fronts, despite occasional protests from American diplomats and intelligence officers.

Dreyfuss carefully catalogues the twists and turns of American policymaking during the 1950s toward Iran and Egypt, two early test-cases for secular nationalism in Islamic countries. In both instances, the United States ultimately sided with Great Britain against the legitimate, popular secularist governments of Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and Iran's Mohammed Mossadegh. And in both instances, the Anglo-Americans played the Muslim Brotherhood as the battering ram to bring down the offending regimes. In the case of Egypt, the Anglo-American efforts initially failed (and President Dwight Eisenhower, in the most decisive postwar break with London, defeated the joint British-French-Israeli invasion of Suez in 1956, temporarily backing the Nasser regime. For years after the Suez crisis, Eisenhower and the United States were revered in Egypt).

One of the architects of the British Great Game of playing the Islamists against the communists in the Near East was **Dr. Bernard Lewis**, a wartime British intelligence Arab Bureau operative, who would later coin the term "Clash of Civilizations." Dreyfuss documents a crucial 1953 essay by Lewis, "Communism and Islam," which argued for a strategy of promoting right-wing Islamist movements and regimes as a weapon against Soviet inroads in the Near East.

Lewis's scheme was embraced by the Dulles brothers,



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

Dr. Bernard Lewis, a wartime British Arab Bureau operative, later went to Princeton and coined the term “Clash of Civilizations,” promoting right-wing Islamists during the Cold War.

Secretary of State John Foster and CIA Director Allen, despite reservations from President Eisenhower and some leading CIA Middle East specialists, such as Miles Copeland, who was an early CIA liaison to Nasser. In 1953, shortly after the appearance of the Lewis essay, the Dulles brothers arranged a White House meeting between the President and Said Ramadan. Ramadan was conveniently in the United States for a conference on Islam at Princeton University. Many of the participants in that conference were Muslim Brotherhood officials from throughout the Arab world.

Despite Washington’s ambivalence about Nasser, Britain’s Prime Minister Anthony Eden had no doubt that the Egyptian President was a menace and had to be eliminated. By 1954, George Young, a top MI6 officer posted in Cairo, was ordered by Eden to assassinate Nasser. Young, according to MI6 documents, turned to the Muslim Brotherhood’s “Secret Apparatus” to do the job. By the middle of the year, a full-scale war had erupted between the Brotherhood and Nasser. Thousands were killed, and eventually, the Brotherhood was forced to flee, taking refuge in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other Arab states in the British or Anglo-American camp.

The U.S. adoption of the British “Islamist” game was described by retired CIA officer Robert Baer, in his recent book *Sleeping With the Devil*: “At the bottom of it all was this dirty little secret in Washington: 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. . . . The logic of the cold war led to a clear conclusion: 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.”

Baer added: “Like any other truly effective covert action, this one was strictly off the books. There was no CIA finding, no memorandum notification to Congress. Not a penny came out of the Treasury to fund it. In other words, no record. All the White House had to do was give a wink and a nod to

countries harboring the Muslim Brothers, like Saudi Arabia and Jordan.”

Operations in Iran: ‘Made in England’

If the efforts by Eden to wipe out Nasser were a net failure, the Anglo-American response to events in Iran was a measured—albeit greatly exaggerated—success. But it was a success that would ultimately blow up in the faces of London and Washington.

Dreyfuss documents that, contrary to popular assumptions, the Muslim Brotherhood was not exclusively a Sunni movement. In Iran, a Shi’ite cleric, **Ayatollah Seyyed Abolqassin Kashani**, had been a close collaborator of al-Banna, Ramadan, and other Brothers. In 1943, he founded an Iranian Shi’ite branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, called the Devotees of Islam. Like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Devotees had their own assassination squads. They failed, in 1949, to assassinate the Shah. Two years later, however, they did assassinate Iran’s Prime Minister Gen. Ali Razmara.

Ironically, General Razmara’s murder led the Shah to appoint Mohammed Mossadegh as the new Prime Minister, setting the stage for yet-another Anglo-American coup against a secular nationalist regime, falsely branded “communist.” As in Egypt, the British turned to the Muslim Brotherhood—the Devotees of Islam—to stage the street riots and other actions that led to the overthrow of Mossadegh. The coup in Iran became the food of legend, about CIA officers Kermit and Archibald Roosevelt, who organized the *bazaar* to stem the tide of communism and stop the nationalization of British oil holdings. A well-informed Iranian source reported that Mossadegh made the decision to step down, rather than either side with the Soviet-backed Iranian Communist Party or unleash his own mass base of supporters to battle the Muslim Brothers and the allied *bazaar*. It was Mossadegh’s concern about the Iranian people that had more to do with the so-called “coup,” than the clandestine prowess of the Roosevelt boys and their British partners.

Princess Ashraf Pahlevi, the Shah’s twin sister, despite her own dubious personal role, voiced the views of many when she zeroed in on the British role: “Many influential clergymen formed alliances with representatives of foreign powers, most often the British, and there was, in fact, a standing joke in Persia that said if you picked up a clergyman’s beard, you would see the words ‘Made in England’ stamped on the other side. . . . With the encouragement of the British, who saw the mullahs as an effective counterforce to the Communists, the elements of the extreme religious right were starting to surface again, after years of being suppressed.”

Targets: Syria, Afghanistan

The next British-backed battle between rightist Islam and communism occurred in Syria. And again, the Muslim Brotherhood was London’s weapon of choice. The Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was called Shabab Muhammed, and its paramilitary wing was called the Combat Vanguard of

Fighters. The group had been founded by Ramadan, the son-in-law and heir of Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna. When a Baathist military coup took place in 1969, the Brotherhood began a campaign of irregular warfare, that built momentum throughout the 1970s. In 1979, the Muslim Brotherhood staged a military assault on the Syrian Army academy at Aleppo, setting the main building on fire and killing 83 cadets. A war between the Brothers and the government ensued, resulting, again, in thousands of deaths. Ultimately, the Syrian Brothers fled to Saudi Arabia.

But even before the battle for Syria was concluded, the United States had been drawn into what would be the hallmark campaign of collusion between Washington, London, and right-wing Islam: The Afghan War. Again, Dreyfuss provides the reader with a thumbnail history of the evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood in remote Afghanistan. Again, the roots are found in Egypt. A group of young Afghan students spent several years at the al-Azhar mosque in Cairo, a center of Muslim Brotherhood activity. They returned to Afghanistan and formed a branch of the Brothers, the Islamic Society. "The Professors," as they were known, would later form the backbone of the Afghan mujahideen, who waged a U.S.- and British-backed decade-long war against the Soviet Army occupation. The three leading "Professors" were: **Abdul Rasul Sayyaf**, **Burhanuddin Rabbani**, and **Gulbuddin Hekmatyar**. Sayyaf and Hekmatyar, in particular, were backed by the Pakistani ISI, the military intelligence branch, and by Pakistan's own Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Group, founded by **Abdul Ala Mawdudi**.

The Afghan War, contrary to popular legend, was not a Western response to the Christmas 1979 Red Army invasion of Afghanistan. In an interview with French journalists, then-National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, boasted that he had convinced the President to authorize pro-active covert support for Afghan mujahideen rebels, provoking the Soviet invasion. The three leading Muslim Brotherhood figures named above led the major factions of the Afghan insurgency. But, as Dreyfuss documents, an estimated 35,000 Arab "Afghansi" from 43 countries were recruited during the decade-long war in Afghanistan to join the battle.

One of the key Anglo-American recruiters to the mujahideen was a Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood member named **Abdullah Azzam**. In 1984, under Anglo-American and Pakistani sponsorship, Azzam and a leading protégé, **Osama bin Laden**, founded the Service Bureau in Peshawar, Pakistan. The Service Bureau served as a hospitality service for incoming jihadists. Azzam had been recruited to the Brotherhood in Syria during the 1960s.

While Washington neo-conservatives such as Michael Ledeen and Richard Perle spent much of the Reagan era parading Hekmatyar and other "Afghansi" leaders around the halls of Congress, promoting them as valiant "freedom fighters," at least one CIA officer with vast experience in the Middle East was warning about the blindness of American policy.

Martha Kessler told Dreyfuss, "We had a World War II-era system of just plopping our officials down in capital cities, and the Islamist movement wasn't happening in those cities, it was happening out in the country and in small towns." As the Afghan war was unraveling, she wrote a series of memos warning that events were turning in a decidedly anti-American direction in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Sudan. "I said that when governments in the region started making efforts to co-opt the Islamists, it would change the character of those governments. I was one of the school that it would be largely anti-Western in tone."

Baer added to Kessler's assessment. He was in the CIA's counterterrorism center following the November 1981 Muslim Brotherhood assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Sadat, a onetime member of the Muslim Brotherhood, had been branded a traitor for signing the Camp David Accords with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Baer recounted that he "started looking for documents on the Muslim Brotherhood." But, he concluded, "it wasn't in our consciousness to go after these people."

The Danger Today

Now, 17 years after the conclusion of the Afghan War, nearly 5 years after the 9/11 attacks, the chickens are coming home to roost, but some of Washington's neo-cons persist in ignoring reality. In his concluding chapter, Dreyfuss zeroes in on American Enterprise Institute "scholar" Reuel Marc Gerech, a former CIA officer-turned neo-con firebrand. In a 2005 book, *The Islamic Paradox: Shiite Clerics, Sunni Fundamentalists and the Coming of Arab Democracy*, Gerech argued that Washington should throw its full weight behind the Islamic right wing—both Shiite and Sunni. He maintained that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was preferable to the Mubarak regime, and that Shi'ite domination over Iraq would herald an era of Western-style democracy. Even Ayatollah Khomeini stood up favorably to Gerech's target Mubarak: "Khomeini submitted the idea of an Islamic republic to an up-or-down popular vote in 1979, and regular elections with some element of competition are morally essential to the regime's conceptions of its own legitimacy, something not at all the case with President Husni Mubarak's dictatorship in Egypt. . . . Anti-Americanism is the common denominator of the Arab states with 'pro-American' dictators. By comparison, Iran is a profoundly pro-American country."

Such sophistry, if unchallenged, will finish off the United States as the beacon of liberty for struggling peoples around the world. One vital step toward reversing the present foreign policy and national security folly called the "Global War on Terrorism," is a grasp of universal history. The Dreyfuss account of America's thoughtless embrace of Britain's Muslim Brothers, while far from flawless, is a very commendable step toward offering the kinds of historical insights that can lead to a major long-overdue overhaul of American policy. For that reason alone, the book is important reading material, particularly in a vital election year.