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**Islamofascism or IslamoBritishism:  
The British Origins of Modern Violent Islamism  
By Nu'man Abd al-Wahid  
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"...If you can look into the seeds of time  
And say which grain will grow and which will not..."

The 'War on Terror' has now taken in the war and invasion of Afghanistan (began 2002) and Iraq (began 2003). There was also the failed Israeli (with the overt acquiescence of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt) attempt to destroy the Lebanese resistance and re-establish itself in southern Lebanon (within a self-declared 72 hour time-frame). One of the reasons for these wars is that civilisation is at loggerheads with a militant and violent brand of political Islam which gained its ultimate murderous expression in the terrorist acts of September 11th 2001 in New York and Washington. One of the terms that seems to be obtaining wide and popular currency in describing this violent brand of political Islamism is 'Islamofascism'. But how historically and politically accurate is this term?

There are two main movements which form the bedrock of contemporary political Islamism and their violent offshoots. Both of these movements, the Wahhabis from Najd and the Muslim Brotherhood came to modern political formation and prominence, as the reader shall see, from under the shadow of a British imperial motive in the early part of the last century.

When one takes an objective look at the origins of these two movements and more specifically the origins of who provided their political leadership, with the essential support in order to thrust their agendas and programmes onto the Arab World and then to the wider Islamic World, one realises that there was no fascist governmental involvement.

The literalist Wahhabis initially came to social and political prominence as part of a pact with the al-Saud tribe in the nineteenth century in the eastern part of the Arabian peninsula known as the Najd. The founder of this doctrine was refuted by all

established Muslim bodies at the time of his appearance and his theological diatribes were rejected by his own brother, a traditional Islamic scholar. After being thrown out from one village to the next for his extremism, he did eventually find an agreeable home with the al-Saud clan. However, what became known as the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance, after initial successes, was a dead and spent force until the British arrived in the region in the late 19th century.

The leader of this alliance at this time, Abd al-Rahman al-Saud had been in exile in the southern tip of the Basra province of the Ottoman Caliphate since 1891. This part of Arabia had a local shiekh who had recently (in 1896) murdered his brother so as to claim leadership of his tribe. He had subsequently established good relations with representatives of the British Empire in the area. This relationship culminated in the signing of an illegal and secret treaty between the Empire and this local sheikh, Mubarak al-Sabah, in 1899. Sheikh Mubarak and the British referred to their small illegal desert vicinity as "Kuwait". As such, this agreement provided Britain with "a strong hold over Mubarak's freedom of action." [\[1\]](#)

This vicinity had gradually grown in importance for the British as it was through the local port that many British goods were arriving from British India. In late 1880s and 1890s the Berlin-Baghdad train route, with a terminus in the southern tip of Basra (i.e. "Kuwait") was being openly proposed by the Ottoman Caliphate and various European financial backers, specifically German. Naturally, the British were not too enthusiastic about this German-Ottoman Caliphate-backed project, rightly perceiving it to be a potential threat to its own trade channels. It was in "Kuwait", under the hospitality of the British-backed al-Sabah, that the Wahhabite al-Saud clan looked to re-establish themselves in the region.

Looking to undermine the hold of the Caliphate and his local ally and representative, Ibn Rashid, Mubarak al-Sabah, now "fortified by his alliance with England" and with the support of his Wahhabi guests went into battle against them in March 1901 [\[2\]](#). Victory here would have pre-empted any designs of the Berlin-Baghdad railway from extending into "Kuwait", therefore potentially removing any threats to the Empire's interests. Furthermore, with an al-Sabah and Wahhabi victory, Britain would have absolute say, via their proxy, on whether the terminus became a viable option.

Mubarak and the Wahhabi leader were defeated. Mubarak lost a further two brothers during the battle. This compelled Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, the son of the then al-Saud leader to look at opening a second front against the Caliphate. Abd al-Aziz and a band of his Wahhabi followers travelled south. If the father and then leader Abd al-Rahman al-Saud had travelled it may have raised the suspicion of Ibn Rashid. Abd al-Aziz Ibn al-Saud managed to capture their so-called ancestral capital, Riyadh on the 15th January 1902. The manner in which he accomplished this was almost identical to the way that Mubarak al-Sabah attained rulership – he unexpectedly began his attack on the existing local ruler in the midst of night while he was asleep.

Upon completing the capture of the city, the Wahhabis slaughtered 1200 of its inhabitants or at the very least, a tenth of its population. Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud topped off his victory by ceremoniously holding aloof the decapitated head of the then representative of the Ottoman Caliphate, one Ibn Ajlan, from the battlements of the fortress and throwing it into the assembled crowd. Recorded decapitations gained immense and vocal disapproval from British-American leaders, when the Wahhabi-inspired al-Qaida televised its beheadings over the last several years. However, back at the start of the last century, such barbaric acts by the Wahhabis only seem to have endeared them to the British representatives on the Arabian coast line. In 1904, British official were openly appreciative about Abd al-Aziz and subsequently urged the British

government to be more overt in their support of him. By 1906, Sir Percy Cox, Political Resident of the Persian Gulf, openly recommended that Britain enter a treaty with Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, after the latter had attacked and killed his local rival while, once again, he was asleep. This murder now established Ibn Saud as ruler of most of the Najd region.

The Ottoman Caliphate's entry into the first European civil war of the last century provided the Wahhabis with an opportunity to further extend their rule and banish their local rivals once and for all. The leader of the Wahhabis, maybe knowing that his brand of Islam was always rejected by the established schools of Islamic thought and law came into an official agreement with Britain. An official treaty between Abd al-Aziz and Britain was declared and signed in 1915. In their first and only battle during this war, the Wahhabis were joined by British political agent of Kuwait, Captain William Shakespear. The Wahhabis were defeated and Shakespear, whose role was directing fire from a cannon onto the Caliphates troops, was killed. He preceded the Tipton Taliban by almost 90 years in becoming the first Briton to fight and die for the Wahhabi cause. However, had there been a victory for the Wahhabis, it seems that Britain was intending on unleashing them into Baghdad, Mecca and along the Hijaz railway route:

"There is no reason to doubt that if he (*William Shakespear*) had lived he would have organised British support for Ibn Saud and his Ikhwan (Wahhabi fanatics)...either north towards Baghdad or west towards the Mecca railway..." [3]

Unfortunately for Britain and fortunately for the Arabs of the region, Baghdad was to remain free from militant Wahhabis until the British-American led invasion of March 2003. In the meantime, the defeat of the Wahhabis and the martyrdom of Captain William Shakespear compelled the British Empire to search for allies elsewhere.

Sharif Hussain bin Ali, the ruler of the Western part of the Arabian peninsula, known as the Hijaz, had previously lived in Istanbul for 18 years. He was much worldlier than the desert sheikhs of the interior so beloved by His Majesty's government. His desert vicinity possessed a civilian infrastructure which included a senate, hospitals, schools and newspapers and the necessary man-labour to function and administer them. He also knew what was at stake during this conflict. Whereas, Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, as leader of the Wahhabis, simply wanted to depose a local sheikh here and there, the Sharif was very well aware of the calls for Arab independence from the various political groups in Arab cities and he seemed to be acting as their figure head.

In correspondence with the British officialdom in Cairo, Sharif Hussain was given the strong impression that Britain would support an independent and unified Arab state in exchange for support against the Ottoman Caliphate. This strong impression is mainly contained in the Hussain-Macmahon letters as well as the letters written to the seven Arabs. [4] Simultaneously and unbeknown to Sharif Hussain, Britain had already made a commitment with the French to jointly carve up the Arab region of the Ottoman Caliphate as well as a commitment to "facilitate" the creation of "Jewish National Home" in Palestine to a small band of European Zionists.

Noticing that Britain had found a new ally, Ibn Saud, became perturbed and very anxious about his position. He had thought he had done enough to officially win over the gentlemen of the British Empire with his "whole-hearted duplicity" which had "always seemed to delight the British officials in the Gulf." [5] Indeed, it had and as such Blighty re-assured him of his value by bestowing the investiture of the Knight Commander of the Indian Empire. He was now Sir Abd al-Aziz Abd al-Rahman Ibn Saud and his band of fanatical Wahhabis were fully entitled to refer to him as "Sir" Abd

al-Aziz if they wished to do so.

Once the war was successfully over, with the assistance of the so-called 'Great Arab Revolt', the Sharif Husain attempted, to no avail, to hold Britain, to what he perceived to be her pre-war commitments and promises. Britain, to no avail, attempted to bribe and threaten him to accept the new British order which was to include the centrality of its new Zionist colonial project in Palestine, regardless of the political wishes of the indigenous population. It was during these years, in the immediate aftermath of the first European civil war of the last century, that Sharif Husain fell out of favour with his one-time patrons. He began to be portrayed as an "obstinate" fellow who "harangued" British officers and was therefore unreasonable. The British made one last attempt for the Sharif to humbly and acquiescently kneel before the new imperial dispensation in the spring of 1924 in Jerusalem. Once again, the hidden and inner meanings of Macmohan's letters were divulged to him. Sharif Hussain, to his credit, did not agree to the new geographical divisions or the British-led Zionist project and as such he was asked to leave a territory he had more than helped to liberate. [6]

With His Majesty's Government's perfidious knife now firmly wrenched in his torso, a British official and future director-general of Trans-Jordan, Alec Kirkbride, was asked to accompany him to the railway station for the trip back to Mecca. It was this journey, one could argue, that heralded the end of a tolerant and traditional Islam and augured the green light for British-backed Wahhabism to attack the Hijaz. The Wahhabi leader always seemed at his most militarily decisive when the Will of God dovetailed with the Will of the British Government - "...by the Will of God and that of yourself, the British government..." Ibn Saud had once said. This British-synchronised, Wahhabi Will thrust into manifestation in October 1924 - Ibn Saud thus called forth the eminent power of Blighty's Knighthood and commandeered his Wahhabi fighters onto the Hijaz. Sharif Hussain had abdicated and one reliable source informs us that the British government was "delighted" at his downfall. [7] The ensuing massacre left 400,000 killed or wounded and 1 million displaced. A new Wahhabi-driven economic, social and political order was established. The existing business class was deemed untrustworthy by the Wahhabi leader and considered close to the vanquished establishment. An economic vacuum was created for others to step into: others such as a newly-arrived labourer from the Hadramout region of Yemen, and Muhammad Awadh Bin Laden, the father of Osama. As we can see, Wahhabism's presence in the Hijaz, which includes Mecca and Medina, is largely predicated on the real refusal of a moderate Muslim Arab leader to acquiescence with British-Zionism's imperial designs and the inevitable ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

At around the same time, Ibn Saud and the British government were jointly clipping the talons of the Wahhabi fanatics who went a touch beyond their remit in the late twenties. [8] British officialdom in Egypt were laying the foundations and championing the cause of another brand of political Islamism. The Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt was founded by Hasan al-Banna during his teaching stint in Ismaliyya, a town generously populated by employees of the British-owned Suez Canal Company, in 1928. It seems that the owners of the Suez Canal Company were impressed enough with Mr al-Banna to the extent that they part-funded the first institution built by the Muslim Brotherhood. [9] Mr al-Banna, on his behalf, although very publicly contemptuous of foreign economic domination by companies such as the Suez Canal Company, was strangely not untoward in accepting the fruits of this economic domination. After four years of developing the new movement in Ismaliyya, he moved the nucleus of the organisation to Cairo where he had earlier studied.

Banna's relationship with the ruling dynasty ensconced in the Palace in Cairo and the

Palace's actual rulers, the representatives of the British Empire, is murky but all too real. That Hasan al-Banna had admirers and supporters within the upper echelons of the Egyptian and British-Egyptian elite are beyond doubt. That Banna and these elite shared a perceived enemy is also beyond doubt. One of Hasan al-Banna's admirers was a Mr. J. Heyworth-Dunne, an employee (and future scholar) of the British Embassy in Cairo. His admiration, even hero-worship, for Mr. al-Banna is contained in the first book (in the English language) on the Muslim Brotherhood, *Religious and political trends in modern Egypt (His Near and Middle East monographs)*. [10] This book is considered by one authoritative account as a primary source of information on the group. [11] However, Heyworth-Dunne is possessed of the modesty to not refer to himself as a participant in some of the history of the Muslim Brotherhood, but simply refers to his acquaintance with the group purely in an observatory capacity. [12]

It seems that one of the reasons British officialdom was enthusiastic about Hasan al-Banna's new religious group was because the then current crop of Islamists were tainted with collaboration with the occupier. For example, the Ummah party, a conservative-religious party was founded by Muhammad Abduh. Abduh had been appointed to the highest religious post in Egypt by Lord Curzon in 1899 and for the next six years implemented reforms, which no doubt, were compatible with the interests of the British Empire.

The challenges faced by the Empire in twenties and thirties Egypt were twofold. Firstly, President Wilson's "declaration of self-determination inspired the Egyptians to higher ideals..." i.e. that is independence. [13] Secondly, there was what Heyworth-Dunne refers to as "communistic ideas" i.e. along with independence this also included socialism and nationalism. To offset these challenges, especially the latter, it was British officials such as Mr Heyworth-Dunne in the pre-war period, which identified Islam as the 'rallying cry' [14] by which British interests could be maintained. However, this Islam is not the Islam that had been practised in the region for the last hundreds of years but the Islam as "taught and represented by Hasan al-Banna". [15] Furthermore he urged the "Egyptian ruling class" to "surrender some of their privileges in order to uplift the less unfortunate of their compatriots, for it is useless to expect Islam to hold out against the ideology of Communism..." otherwise. [16]

More so, with the political arrival of Hasan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood, Heyworth-Dunne informs the reader that there had been a qualitative change in political violence:

"the difference in the nature of the struggle now and twenty years ago is that two decades, it was anti-British, now it was Egyptian against Egyptian..." [17]

A cynic may state that this development was advantageous, possible even congenial to the British colonial presence in Egypt.

In the immediate post war period, Heyworth-Dunne was joined by other British intellectuals such as Bernard Lewis and Kenneth Cragg in their noble and divinely unsolicited defence of Islam. Furthermore, it seems that the United States took up the "Islam" rallying cry when it superseded and inherited British foreign policy initiatives in the Middle East in the late 1950s. One clear example of this theory being put into practise was when the United States National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, visited the Afghanistan border in the late 1970s and delivered this battle cry to the assembled Afghan fighters which later went onto to defeat the Soviet Union:

"We now of the deep belief in God, that we are confident their struggle will precede...your cause is right and God is on your side." [18]



There were golden opportunities in the early years of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, to show that it was pro-fascist or even fascist. For example, during the 1936 signing of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty, the Brotherhood did not come out against this neo-colonial treaty, which further wedded Egypt's economy and security to the British Empire. Actually, according to one writer, it was conspicuously silent during this period when its supporters were expecting otherwise. During the second European civil war of the last century, as the German fascists were fighting the British in North Africa, many Egyptian parties came out in support of the Germans, mostly out of hostility to the British occupation over the fifty previous years, yet the Muslim Brotherhood and specifically Hasan al-Banna once again remained conspicuously silent. Surely, there would have been no better time to show off your fascistic credentials, if there were any, than during this period.

In the 1930s and 1940s there is nothing to suggest that the Muslim Brotherhood was pro-fascist. At the same time, one cannot agree with established left wing writers who assert that the Muslim Brotherhood, "was literally created in the 1920's by the British" without the evidence to support a claim. [19] However, there is much to suggest, as I have outlined, that the British Empire had its perfidious finger in the Muslim Brotherhood halal pie in the early years. This shadowy relationship all changed with the arrival of the Free Officers and specifically Nasser, in Egypt in July 1952.

During the trial of the Muslim Brotherhood's attempted assassination of President Nasser in 1954 it was firmly established that certain contact and conversations about Egypt's future had taken place with the British Embassy and the organisation. Furthermore, by the time the Suez Crises took to the world stage in 1956, the Muslim Brotherhood were firmly in the British Empire's camp, manning a radio station from Cyprus denouncing Nasser strategies and actions while the British, French and Israel's ethnic cleansers were plotting the invasion of their homeland.

That both of these movements came to modern political formation during the overt British imperial reign in the Arab World is beyond doubt. That there is ample evidence the agenda of the political leadership of these movements, in the early years, was dovetailed with the interests of the British Empire is also beyond doubt. That certain early developments and strategies of these movements were orchestrated by the British Empire's representatives is, too, beyond doubt. The British Empire's contribution to the growth of Wahhabism in the early years was politically and militarily advantageous to Wahhabism's growth and eventual victory. Its service to the Muslim Brotherhood in the early years was in the form of ideological and strategic development. Both of these movements coalesced under the perceived threat of Nasser and Arab Nationalism to British interests. Yet, according to the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in his "Clash about Civilisations" speech [20] during the 'War on Terror', "The roots of...extremism are deep. They reach down through decades of alienation, victim-hood and political oppression in the Arab...World." Putting aside any possible qualms about being lectured to on values by a prime minister who waged an illegal war, a venerable war criminal or "fraudulent warmonger" as one British journalist refers to him and if we are compelled to discuss or narrate in terms of 'deepness' and 'decades', let's not allow ourselves to forget the British contribution to the emergence of Islamic extremism. What Blair failed to mention in this speech was the foresight shown by British politicians, intellectuals and officers in identifying Islamic extremism or Islamism as a most expedient weapon against perceived anti-British interests in the Arab World.

Another possible contributory factor to extremism may possibly be contemporary British venal business deals with the Saudi-Wahhabi clan such as the two al-Yammah

deals. For some reason, Blair fails to mention this squandering of Arab wealth on the British arms industry and instead singles out "American foreign policy" as the major bone of global contention. It may well be a case, as a philosopher could remark, that if "American foreign policy" did not exist, the likes of Blair and certain elements of the British anti-war movement would have invented it. The first allegedly corrupt al-Yamamah deal in the 1980s has bankrolled a British company, BAE, to the tune of almost £43 billion over the last twenty years and such deals can only happen because the Saudi Arabian nation – home of 15 of the 19 suicide hijackers on September 11th 2001 - lives in "alienation...and political oppression" i.e. have no say in how the ruling clan spends their money. If they did have a say, it is very unlikely that bankrolling (or subsidizing) the British economy would be high on their agenda. The second deal has recently been signed and is expected to accrue the British economy even greater revenue over the next twenty years.

It is Britain, not the generic 'West', fascism, the United States, Iran, Syria, Zimbabwe or North Korea which first expediently identified a political brand of violent Islamism as a tool to fend off the challenges of the Ottoman Caliphate, Wilsonian self-determination, third world independence, nationalism, socialism or communism. British support for what became derogatorily known during the current 'War on Terror' as Islamofascism predates the conflict in Bosnia, Afghanistan, the conflict with Nasser, massive oil revenue, the Cold War and the emergence of the United States's Eisenhower Doctrine.

Blair concluded his speech emphasising that, "...extremism is not the true voice of Islam." It may certainly not be, yet Islamic extremism is the only expediency that has always successfully contributed toward defeating movements and peoples in the Middle East that were considered obtrusive and detrimental to British interests. And it is this extremism which maybe required again if a threat to British interests once again arises.

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**BlackCommentator.com** Guest Commentator, *BlaNu'man Abd al-Wahid*, is a UK-based freelance writer (of Yemeni origin) who specializes in the political relationship between the British state and the Arab World. His focus is on how Britain has historically maintained its interests in the Arab World and the Middle East. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Abd al-Wahid.

[1] Gary Troeller, [The Birth of Saudi Arabia: Britain and the Rise of the House of Sa'ud](#), (London : Frank Cass, 1976), pg. 10

[2] *ibid.*, pg19

[3] David Howarth, [The Desert King: Ibn Saud and his Arabia](#), (London : Quartet Books, 1980), pg. 82. Troeller also mentions British generals on the ground who agree with this view, *op. cit.*, pg120, nt. 24. In this respect, T.E. Lawrence only became "of Arabia" because British-Wahhabism was routed at this point by the Ottoman Caliphate.

[4] George Antonious, [The Arab Awakening](#), (Florida: Simon Publications, 2001) Appendix A and D, pg. 413 and 433 respectively.

[5] Howarth, *op. cit.*, pg 50-51

[6] John Keay, [Sowing the Wind: The Seeds of Conflict in the Middle East](#), (London: John Murray, 2004), pg. 211

[7] H. StJ. Philby, [Arabian Days](#), (London : Robert Hale Limited, 1948), pg243

[8] Wahhabi fanatics such as Faisal al-Duwish, more or less the Osama bin Laden of his day.

[9] Richard P. Mitchell, [The Society of the Muslim Brothers](#), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pg. 9

[10] J. Heyworth-Dunne, [Religious and political trends in modern Egypt \(His Near and Middle East monographs\)](#), (Washington: McGregor & Werner, Inc., 1950)

[11] Mitchell, op. cit., xxiv: Heyworth-Dunne, "was a participant in some of the history of the movement and his work **must** be considered a primary source." (Italics are mine).

[12] Heyworth-Dunne refers to himself as an observer. See Heyworth-Dunne, op. Cit., pg vii.

[13] Heyworth-Dunne, op. cit., pg5

[14] The term belongs to Robert Dreyfuss. See his [Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam \(American Empire Project\)](#), (New York, Metropolitan Books, 2005). In some respects this essay is filling out the important gaps in the early chapters of this (and Said Aburish's, [The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of the House of Saud](#), London: Bloomsbury, 2005) essential book.

[15] Heyworth-Dunne, op. cit., pg50. Another writer admired by our man in Cairo, was Sayid Qutb, see *ibid*, pg 97.

[16] *ibid.*, pg78

[17] *ibid.*, pg77

[18] Zbigniew Brzezinski, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WaiJtLrEwVU&feature=related>. Accessed 30<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

[19] Samir Amin, Political Islam in the Service of Imperialism, Monthly Review, December 2007 - <http://www.monthlyreview.org/1207amin.htm>. Accessed 31<sup>st</sup> August 2008.


[20] Tony Blair, 'A Clash about Civilisations' <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page9224>. Access 30<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

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