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Why We're Never Told Why We're Attacked

April 9, 2016

Exclusive: When Western media discusses terrorism against the West, the motive is almost always left out, even when the terrorists state they are avenging longstanding Western violence in the Muslim world, reports Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria
Special to Consortium News

After a Russian commercial airliner was downed over Egypt's Sinai last October, Western media reported that the Islamic State bombing was retaliation against Russian airstrikes in Syria. The killing of 224 people, mostly Russian tourists on holiday, was matter-of-factly treated as an act of war by a fanatical group without an air force resorting to terrorism as a way to strike back.

Yet, Western militaries have killed infinitely more innocent civilians in the Middle East than Russia has. Then why won't Western officials and media cite retaliation for that Western violence as a cause of terrorist attacks on New York, Paris and Brussels?

Twin Towers on 9/11. (National Park Service)

Instead, there's a fierce determination not to make the same kinds of linkages that the press made so easily when it was Russia on the receiving end of terror. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Obama Ignores Russian Terror Victims."]

For example, throughout four hours of Sky News' coverage of the July 7, 2005 attacks in London, only the briefest mention was made about a possible motive for that horrific assault on three Underground trains and a bus, killing 52 people. But the attacks came just

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two years after Britain's participation in the murderous invasion of Iraq.

Prime Minister Tony Blair, one of the Iraq War's architects, condemned the loss of innocent life in London and linked the attacks to a G-8 summit he'd opened that morning. A TV host then read and belittled a 10-second claim of responsibility from a self-proclaimed Al Qaeda affiliate in Germany saying that the Iraq invasion was to blame. There was no more discussion about it.

To explain why these attacks happen is not to condone or justify terrorist outrages against innocent civilians. It is simply a responsibility of journalism, especially when the "why" is no mystery. It was fully explained by Mohammad Sidique Khan, one of the four London suicide bombers. Though speaking for only a tiny fraction of Muslims, he said in a videotaped recording before the attack:

"Your democratically-elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security you will be our targets and until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation."

The Islamic State published the following reason for carrying out last November's Paris attacks:

"Let France and all nations following its path know that they will continue to be at the top of the target list for the Islamic State and that the scent of death will not leave their nostrils as long as they partake part in the crusader campaign … and boast about their war against Islam in France, and their strikes against Muslims in the lands of the Caliphate with their jets."

Claiming It's a State of Mind

Ignoring such clear statements of intent, we are instead served bromides by the likes of State Department spokesman Mark Toner about the Brussels bombings, saying it is impossible "to get into the minds of those who carry out these attacks."

Mind reading isn't required, however. The Islamic State explicitly told us in a press statement why it did the Brussels attacks: "We promise black days for all crusader nations allied in their war against the Islamic State, in response to their aggressions against it."

Yet, still struggling to explain why it happened, Toner said, "I think it reflects more of an effort to inflict on who they see as Western or Westerners … fear that they can carry out these kinds of attacks and to attempt to lash out."

Toner ascribed the motive to a state of mind: "I don't know if this is about establishing a caliphate beyond the territorial gains that they've tried to make in Iraq and Syria, but it's another aspect of Daesh's kind of warped ideology that they're carrying out these attacks on Europe and elsewhere if they can. … Whether it's the hopes or the dreams or the aspirations of a certain people never justifies violence."

After 9/11, President George W. Bush infamously said the U.S. was attacked because "they hate our freedoms." It's a perfect example of a Western view that ascribes motives to Easterners without allowing them to speak for themselves or taking them seriously when they do.

Explaining his motive behind 9/11, Osama bin Laden, in his *Letter to America,* expressed anger about U.S. troops stationed on Saudi soil. Bin Laden asked: "Why are we fighting and opposing you? The answer is very simple: Because you attacked us and continue to attack us." (Today the U.S. has dozens of bases in seven countries in the region.)

So why won't Western officials and corporate media take the jihadists' statements of intent at face value? Why won't they really tell us why we are attacked?

It seems to be an effort to cover up a long and ever more intense history of Western military and political intervention in the Middle East and the violent reactions it provokes, reactions that put innocent Western lives at risk. Indirect Western culpability in these terrorist acts is routinely suppressed, let alone evidence of direct Western involvement with terrorism.

Some government officials and journalists might delude themselves into believing that Western intervention in the Middle East is an attempt to protect civilians and spread democracy to the region,

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In Memoriam:Robert Parry, 1949-2018

WINNER OF THE 2015 I.F. STONE MEDAL FROM HARVARD'S NIEMAN FOUNDATION instead of bringing chaos and death to further the West's strategic and economic aims. Other officials must know better.

1920-1950: A Century of Intervention Begins

A few might know the mostly hidden history of duplicitous and often reckless Western actions in the Middle East. It is hidden only to most Westerners, however. So it is worth looking in considerable detail at this appalling record of interference in the lives of millions of Muslims and peoples of other faiths to appreciate the full weight it exerts on the region. It can help explain anti-Western anger that spurs a few radicals to commit atrocities in the West.

French diplomat Francois George-Picot and British colonial officer Mark Sykes drew lines across a Middle East map of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, carving out states with boundaries that are nearly the same today.

The history is an unbroken string of interventions from the end of the First World War until today. It began after the war when Britain and France double-crossed the Arabs on promised independence for aiding them in victory over the Ottoman Empire. The secret 1916 Sykes-Picot accord divided the region between the European powers behind the Arabs' backs. London and Paris created artificial nations from Ottoman provinces to be controlled by their installed kings and rulers with direct intervention when necessary.

What has followed for 100 years has been continuous efforts by Britain and France, superseded by the United States after the Second World War, to manage Western dominance over a rebellious region.

The new Soviet government revealed the Sykes-Picot terms in November 1917 in *Izvestia*. When the war was over, the Arabs revolted against British and French duplicity. London and Paris then ruthlessly crushed the uprisings for independence.

France defeated a proclaimed Syrian government in a single day, July 24, 1920, at the Battle of Maysalun. Five years later there was a second Syrian revolt, replete with assassinations and sabotage, which took two years to suppress. If you walk through the souk in Old Damascus and look up at the corrugated iron roof you see tiny specks of daylight peeking through. Those are bullet holes from French war planes that massacred civilians below.

Britain put down a series of independence revolts in Iraq between 1920 and 1922, first with 100,000 British and Indian troops and then mostly with the first use of air power in counterinsurgency. Thousands of Arabs were killed. Britain also helped its installed King Abdullah put down rebellions in Jordan in 1921 and 1923.

London then faced an Arab revolt in Palestine lasting from 1936 to 1939, which it brutally crushed, killing about 4,000 Arabs. The next decade, Israeli terrorists drove the British out of Palestine in 1947, one of the rare instances when terrorists attained their political goals.

Germany and Italy, late to the Empire game, were next to invade North Africa and the Middle East at the start of the Second World War. They were driven out by British imperial forces (largely Indian) with U.S. help. Britain invaded and defeated nominally independent Iraq, which had sided with the Axis. With the Soviet Union, Britain also invaded and occupied Iran.

After the war, the U.S. assumed regional dominance under the guise of fending off Soviet regional influence. Just three years after Syrian independence from France, the two-year old Central Intelligence Agency engineered a Syrian coup in 1949 against a democratic, secular government. Why? Because it had balked at approving a Saudi pipeline plan that the U.S. favored. Washington installed Husni al-Za'im, a military dictator, who approved the plan.

AMERICAN DISPATCHES: COLLECTED JOURNALISM OF ROBERT PARRY

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1950s: Syria Then and Now

Before the major invasion and air wars in Iraq and Libya of the past 15 years, the 1950s was the era of America's most frequent, and mostly covert, involvement in the Middle East. The Eisenhower administration wanted to contain both Soviet influence and Arab nationalism, which revived the quest for an independent Arab nation. After a series of coups and counter-coups, Syria returned to democracy in 1955, leaning towards the Soviets.

A 1957 Eisenhower administration coup attempt in Syria, in which Jordan and Iraq were to invade the country after manufacturing a pretext, went horribly wrong, provoking a crisis that spun out of Washington's control and brought the U.S. and Soviets to the brink of war.

President Dwight Eisenhower

Turkey put 50,000 troops on the Syrian border, threatening to invade. Soviet premier Nikita *Khrushchev* threatened Turkey with an implied nuclear attack and the U.S. got Ankara to back off. This sounds eerily familiar to what happened last month when Turkey again threatened to invade Syria and the U.S. put on the brakes. The main difference is that Saudi Arabia in 1957 was opposed to the invasion of Syria, while it was ready to join it last month. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Risking Nuclear War for Al Qaeda?"]

In the 1950s, the U.S. also began its association with Islamic religious extremism to counter Soviet influence and contain secular Arab nationalism. "We should do everything possible to stress the 'holy war' aspect," President Eisenhower told his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. After the Cold War, religious extremists, some still tied to the West, became themselves the excuse for U.S. intervention.

Despite U.S. regional ascendance in the 1950s, Britain and France weren't through. In 1953, an MI6-CIA coup in Iran replaced a democracy with a restored monarchy when Mohammed Mossadegh, the elected prime minister, was overthrown after seeking to nationalize British-controlled Iranian oil. Britain had discovered oil in Iran in 1908, spurring deeper interest in the region.

Three years later Britain and France combined with Israel to attack Egypt in 1956 when President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had taken over from the ousted British-backed King Farouk, moved to nationalize the Suez Canal. The U.S. stopped that operation, too, denying Britain emergency oil supplies and access to the International Monetary Fund if the Brits didn't back down.

Suez represented the final shift in external power in the Middle East from the U.K. to the U.S. But Washington couldn't stop Britain from trying and failing to assassinate Nasser, who had sparked the Arab nationalist movement.

In 1958, the U.S. landed 14,000 Marines in Lebanon to prop up President Camille Chamoun after a civil conflict broke out against Chamoun's intention to change the constitution and run for reelection. The rebellion was minimally supported by the United Arab Republic, the 1958-61 union between Egypt and Syria. It was the first U.S. invasion of an Arab country, excluding the U.S.'s World War II intervention in North Africa.

1960 to 2003: Interventions Post Colonial

The 1954-1962 Algerian rebellion against French colonialism, which Paris brutally tried to suppress, included Algerian acts of terrorism. Exhibiting the same cluelessness displayed by State Department spokesman Toner, the French attitude towards the uprising was expressed by an exasperated French officer in film *The Battle of Algiers* when he exclaimed, "What do you people want?"

From the 1960s to the 1980s, U.S. intervention in the region was mostly restricted to military support for Israel in the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars. From an Arab perspective that represented a major U.S. commitment to protect Israeli colonialism.

The Soviet Union also intervened directly in the 1967-70 War of Attrition between Egypt and Israel

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when Nasser went to Moscow to say he'd resign and have a pro-Western leader take over if the Russians didn't come to his aid. In backing Nasser, the Soviets lost 58 men.

The Soviets were also involved in the region to varying degrees and times throughout the Cold War, giving aid to Palestinians, Nasser's Egypt, Syria, Saddam's Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi's Libya — all countries and leaders charting an independent course from the West.

During the 1970 Black September conflict between Jordan and Palestinian guerrillas, the U.S. had Marines poised to embark in Haifa and ready to secure Amman airport when Jordan repelled a Syrian invasion in support of the Palestinians.

In the 1980s the U.S. backed Saddam Hussein in his brutal, eight-year war with Iran, supplying him with arms, intelligence and chemical weapons, which he did not hesitate to use against Iranians and Kurds. President Ronald Reagan also bombed Libya in 1986 after accusing it without conclusive evidence of a Berlin bombing ten days earlier that killed a U.S. soldier.

The U.S. returned more directly to the region with a vengeance in the 1991 Gulf War, burying alive surrendering Iraqi troops with bulldozers; shooting thousands of soldiers in the back as they retreated on the Highway of Death, and calling for uprisings in the Shia south and Kurdish north and then leaving them to Saddam's revenge.

Iraq never recovered fully from the devastation, being crushed for 12 years under U.N. and U.S. sanctions that then U.N. Ambassador Madeleine Albright admitted contributed to the deaths of half a million Iraqi children. But she said it was "worth it."

President Ronald Reagan

Iraq's sanctions only ended after the 2003 full-scale U.S. and British invasion of the sovereign Arab nation, an assault justified by bogus claims about Iraq hiding stockpiles of WMD that could be shared with Al Qaeda. The invasion killed hundreds of thousands of people and left Iraq devastated. The invasion also unleashed a civil war and gave rise to the terrorist group, the Islamic State in Iraq, which later merged with terrorists in Syria to become ISIS.

Throughout this century of intervention, Britain, France and the U.S. managed the region through strong alliances with dictators or monarchs who had no regard for democratic rights. But when those autocrats became expendable, such as Saddam Hussein had, they are disposed of.

The Biggest Invasion Yet

While most Americans may be unaware of this long history of accumulated humiliation of Muslims, Christians and other religious minorities in the region — and the resulting hatred of the West — they can't ignore the Iraq invasion, the largest by the West in the region, excluding World War II. Nor is the public unaware of the 2011 intervention in Libya, and the chaos that has resulted. And yet no link is made between these disasters and terror attacks on the West.

The secular strongmen of Iraq, Libya and Syria were targeted because they dared to be independent of Western hegemony — not because of their awful human rights records. The proof is that Saudi Arabia's and Israel's human rights records also are appalling, but the U.S. still staunchly stands by these "allies."

During the so-called Arab Spring, when Bahrainis demanded democracy in that island kingdom, the U.S. mostly looked the other way as they were crushed by a combined force of the nation's monarchy and Saudi troops. Washington also clung to Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak until the bitter end.

However, under the pretext of protecting the Libyan population, the U.S. and NATO implemented a bloody "regime change" in Libya leading to anarchy, another failed state and the creation of one more ISIS enclave. For the past five years, the West and its Gulf allies have fueled the civil war in Syria, contributing to another humanitarian disaster.

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The West's motive for all this meddling is often pinned on oil. But obedience is a strong factor. Hans Morgenthau wrote in *Politics Among Nations* (1968), that the urge of empires to expand "will not be satisfied so long as there remains anywhere a possible object of domination – a politically organized group of men which by its very independence challenges the conqueror's lust for power."

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Tariq Ali, in his 2003 book *Bush in Babylon*, writes about Gnaeus Julius Agricola, the Roman general responsible for much of the conquest of Britain in the First Century: "On one of his visits to the outer reaches of [Britain], Agricola looked in the direction of Ireland and asked a colleague why it remained unoccupied. Because, came the reply, it consisted of uncultivable bog lands and was inhabited by very primitive tribes. What could it possibly have to offer the great Empire? The unfortunate man was sternly admonished. Economic gain isn't all. Far more important is the example provided by an unoccupied country. It may be backward, but it is still free."

Cloaking Motives

Little of this long history of Western manipulation, deceit and brutality in the Middle East is known to Americans because U.S. media almost never invokes it to explain Arab and Iranian attitudes towards the West.

Muslims remember this history, however. I know Arabs who are still infuriated by the Sykes-Picot backstabbing, let alone the most recent depredations. Indeed fanatics like the Islamic State are still ticked off about the Crusades, a much earlier round of Western intervention. In some ways it's surprising, and welcomed, that only the tiniest fraction of Muslims has turned to terrorism.

Billionaire Republican candidate Donald Trump.

Nevertheless, Islamophobes like Donald Trump want to keep all Muslims out of the U.S. until he figures out "what the hell is going on." He says Muslims have a "deep hatred" of Americans. But he won't figure it out because he's ignoring the main cause of that hatred – the past century of intervention, topped by the most recent Western atrocities in Iraq and Libya.

Stripping out the political and historical motives renders terrorists as nothing more than madmen fueled by irrational hate of a benevolent West that says it only wants to help them. They hate us simply because we are Western, according to people like Toner, and not because we've done anything to them.

Israel and its Western enablers likewise bury the history of Israel's ethnic cleansing and piecemeal conquest of Palestine so they can dismiss Palestinians who turn to terrorism as motivated only by hatred of Jews for being Jews.

I've asked several Israelis why Palestinians tend to hate them. The more educated the Israeli the more likely the answer was because of the history of how Israel was established and how it continues to rule. The less educated my respondent, the more likely I heard that they hate us simply because we are Jews.

There's no excuse for terrorism. But there is a practical way to curb it: end the current interventions and occupations and plan no more.

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The Psychology of Terror

Of course, anger at the West's history of exploiting Muslim lands isn't the only motivation for terrorism. There are emotional and group pressures that push some over the line to strap on bombs and blow up innocent people around them. Thankfully, it takes a very unusual type of individual to react to this ugly history with ugly acts of terror.

Money also plays a part. We've seen waves of defections as ISIS has recently cut fighters' pay in half. Anger at Western-installed and propped-up local rulers who oppress their people on behalf of the West is another motive. Extremist preachers, especially Saudi Wahhabis, also share the blame as they inspire terrorism, usually against Shia.

Wading into the psychology of why someone turns to terrorism is an unenviable task. The official Western view is that Islamist extremists merely hate modernity and secularism. That might be their motive in wanting to backwardly transform their own societies by removing Western influence. But it's not what they say when they claim responsibility for striking inside the West.

Obama and King Salman, Jan. 27, 2015, at Obama's State Visit to Saudi Arabia. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza).

To ignore their words and dismiss their violent reaction to the long and ongoing history of Western intervention may shield Americans and Europeans from their partial responsibility for these atrocities. But it also provides cover for the continuing interventions, which in turn will surely produce more terrorism.

Rather than looking at the problem objectively – and self-critically – the West ludicrously cloaks its own violence as an effort to spread democracy (which never seems to materialize) or protect civilians (who are endangered instead). To admit any connection between the sordid historical record and anti-Western terrorism would be to admit culpability and the price that the West is paying for its dominance.

Worse still, letting terrorists be perceived as simply madmen without a cause allows the terrorist response to become justification for further military action. This is precisely what the Bush administration did after 9/11, falsely seeking to connect the attacks to the Iraqi government.

By contrast, connecting terrorism to Western intervention could spark a serious self-examination of the West's behavior in the region leading to a possible retreat and even an end of this external dominance. But that is clearly something policymakers in Washington, London and Paris – and their subservient media – aren't prepared to do.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "Why Many Muslims Hate the West" and "Muslim Memories of Western Imperialism."]

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