
These ludicrous lies about the West and Islam

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The first Islamist terrorist plot against New York's World Trade Centre was carried out on 26 February 1993 with a car bomb under one of the twin towers. It killed six people but failed in its aim of bringing the whole building down. To achieve that, another plot was hatched.

Meanwhile, British and American foreign policy was focused not on the Islamic world, but on the unstable transition of former communist countries to democracy. Twice during the Nineties, Nato launched military interventions in the Balkans, both aimed at protecting Muslim populations in Bosnia and Kosovo. What Middle East policy there was focused on diplomatic efforts, led by President Clinton, to negotiate lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

This was hardly a Western war against Islam. Britain and America spent much of the Nineties trying to prevent conflicts or to resolve them. At worst, as shamefully in Rwanda, they simply ignored them. They were transparently not running a conspiracy to trample the Muslim faithful underfoot. The people who depicted it that way were a tiny minority telling lies to justify murder.

But things have changed. The argument that terrorism is, in fact, a response to Western actions overseas has gained currency. It was voiced most recently on Saturday in an open letter by a number of influential British Muslim leaders to Tony Blair. The Prime Minister's policy in the Middle East, they said, puts British lives at risk. The implication is that the young Britons who last week were accused of plotting to blow up passenger planes in mid-air would have been less susceptible to al-Qaeda recruitment had Britain not fought wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Policy should be changed, they said, to avoid giving ideological 'ammunition to extremists'.

There is indeed a plausible argument that military action in recent years has made Britain less, not more, secure. In particular, the conduct of the war in Iraq, regardless of the virtues of removing Saddam Hussein from office, has been riddled with error. The absence of weapons of mass destruction, removal of which was the premise for war, has undermined trust in the Prime Minister. Meanwhile, engagement in Iraq has made it harder to secure victory in Afghanistan, where the anti-terror justification for war was rock solid.

But even within the bleakest possible analysis of Mr Blair's foreign policy, it is still simply not true that the West is waging war on Islam. Just as it is not true that the CIA was really behind the 11 September attacks or any other arrant conspiratorial nonsense that enjoys widespread credence in the Middle East and beyond. It is also a logical and moral absurdity to imply, as some critics of British policy have done, that mass murder is somehow less atrocious when it is motivated by an elaborate narrative of political grievance.

If young British Muslims are alienated, that is sad and their anger should be addressed. But anyone whose alienation leads them to want to kill indiscriminately has crossed a line into psychopathic criminality. Policy cannot be dictated by the need to placate such people.

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