

Tony Blair whitewashes imperialism's role in the Middle East

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In an article for Britain's *Observer* newspaper, published January 26, former prime minister Tony Blair claimed that the source of conflict in the Middle East and internationally today was to be found in religious extremism.

Between 1997 and 2007, Blair led a government that oversaw a policy of imperialist militarism abroad and attacks on democratic rights domestically. Under his premiership, Britain took part in wars in Kosovo (1999), Sierra Leone (2000), Afghanistan (2001) and, most infamously, Iraq (2003).

His claim that the roots of conflict today lie in extremist religion is an attempt to obscure his own responsibility, together with the United States, for the destabilisation of the Middle East and the stoking of ethnic and sectarian tensions. The military interventions of his government embraced this as a strategy to devastating effect, as was seen in the promotion of ethnic divisions between the Kosovo Albanians and Serbs in the Balkans, and the stirring up of religious differences in Iraq, with the result that the country is now virtually split into Sunni, Shia and Kurdish regions.

Blair seeks to convince his readers otherwise. His newfound commitment to democratic values and the fight against extremism is, according to him, "based on my experience post-9/11 of how countries whose people were freed from dictatorship have then had democratic aspirations thwarted by religious extremism."

Such assertions, which portray the military interventions of Britain and the United States after 2001 as altruistic acts motivated by humanitarian considerations, produced dissent even within ruling circles. Jonathan Eyal, of the Royal United Services Institute think tank told the *Guardian*, "It was not the

lack of sufficient knowledge about history and religion which led to the Iraqi debacle, but the lack of restraint among politicians who had all the relevant information at their fingertips."

The brutality of the Iraq operation and its consequences has been well documented, with some estimates suggesting that up to 1 million Iraqis have lost their lives since 2003. Less than two weeks before the appearance of Blair's article, a 250-page submission to the prosecutor's office of the International Criminal Court (ICC) by the German-based European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights and the British law firm Public Interest Lawyers urged the ICC to take action against systematic torture by British forces that they stated amounted to war crimes.

Due for publication later this year, the report of the Chilcott Inquiry is widely expected to contain even more evidence exposing the lies and disregard for international law that accompanied the drive to war with Iraq.

Writing as if he had been an innocent bystander, Blair offers himself as a modern-day crusader for religious tolerance: "All over the region, and including in Iraq, where exactly the same sectarianism threatens the right of the people to a democratic future, such a campaign has to be actively waged. It is one reason why the Middle East matters so much and why any attempt to disengage is so wrong and short-sighted."

Behind the talk of an educational campaign against extremism, his caution against "disengagement" reveals Blair's real concern. He is seeking to justify further imperialist interventions in the region in defence of the interests of Britain and the US. Bogus "humanitarian" arguments have been used to justify every military intervention and war since the Balkan

conflict in the 1990s, including the war in Iraq and the intervention against Libya in 2011 to overthrow the Gaddafi regime. All of this has been legitimised by forces formerly deemed “left” or anti-war, who have fully embraced the humanitarian pretensions of if not the toxic war criminal Blair, then his ilk.

The hypocrisy of Blair’s commitment to “democracy” should be lost on no one. It was precisely such arguments, about the need for an “ideological” fight against extremism and “terrorism,” that served as the basis for the attacks on democratic rights that he led when in power.

In 2005, the Blair government proposed a resolution to the UN Security Council urging not only military measures against “terrorists,” but also ideological ones. It proposed that member states institute laws to ban the “incitement” or “encouragement” of terrorist activity. In Britain, the result of this was the Terrorism Act 2006, which made these actions criminal offences and has since been used to prosecute individuals purely on the strength of their political or religious views and in the absence of any evidence of ties to terrorist groups.

Blair’s *Observer* piece makes the case for even more repressive measures. Noting that the development of technology had created a “global conversation,” he went on to argue that the ability to use the Internet and other means to spread extremist views must be countered. He declared, “We have to be prepared to take the security measures necessary for our immediate protection.”

The warning over the danger posed by religious extremism came only several months after Blair spoke out strongly in favour of military action in Syria on the side of the opposition, dominated by Islamist extremist elements close to Al Qaeda. Following the alleged poison gas attack last August, he was heavily critical of current Labour Party leader Ed Miliband for his tactical opposition to a military attack.

Last week, on a tour of Egypt in his role as “peace envoy” to the Israel-Palestine conflict, Blair issued a statement giving his full backing to the military regime of General Al-Sisi, who came to power in a coup last July and has been responsible for the deaths of thousands of opposition protesters.

Such a record was of little concern to Blair, who declared in a televised interview, “The fact is, the Muslim Brotherhood tried to take the country away

from its basic values of hope and progress. The army have intervened, at the will of the people, but in order to take the country to the next stage of its development, which should be democratic. We should be supporting the new government in doing that.”

Only two weeks previously, Blair gave an address at a memorial service for former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, a figure widely regarded as a war criminal for his role in the massacre of Palestinian civilians in Lebanon in 1982 and his brutal military assaults on the occupied territories when in power. Blair hailed him as a great leader who had not been afraid to make “difficult decisions.”

For upholding the interests of the imperialist powers, Blair has been richly rewarded and is now a multimillionaire. Alongside his activities as a “peace” envoy in the Middle East, he leads the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. As he notes in the *Observer* article, this foundation is active across 22 countries, promoting Blair’s perspective of religious intolerance forming the basis of the world’s conflicts. Developed in collaboration with the Harvard Divinity School, a new web site that will report on religion and conflict to be launched later this year was hailed by Blair, along with a university master’s programme that his foundation has played a role in creating.



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