

No, Tony Blair and the West Aren't to Blame for Violence in the Muslim World

The rise of Islamism was bound to promote violent conflict.

By John O'Sullivan

Former prime minister Tony Blair and the current crisis in Iraq have somehow become entangled in the British public mind. Blair himself is slightly responsible for this confusion — and for the greater confusion that flows from it — because he chose the moment of Iraqi crisis to claim that he, Bush, the West, and the Second Gulf War are not responsible for the wave of violent Islamism sweeping across Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. On this point Blair is indisputably correct — exactly why will become clear in a moment — and readers who doubt this should read his crisply convincing op-ed in yesterday's *Financial Times*.

But Blair is such a polarizing figure that whatever he says, half of the country will assert the opposite. In addition there is in Britain, as in much of the Western world, a masochistic appetite for self-blame and self-condemnation. For these two reasons it strikes many people as outrageous for Blair to claim that he is not responsible for Boko Haram's kidnapping of schoolgirls or the murders of prisoners committed by ISIS.

The FT felt it necessary to appease this sentiment by putting Edward Luce's denunciation of neocons directly under Blair's piece — presumably as a clove of garlic that wards off vampires. But it assumes rather than argues that neocons (and by extension Blair) were wrong over the Iraq War and that they must therefore be wrong over anything else that has Iraq in the same sentence. For my part, because I neither hate nor love Blair but merely regard him as someone good at winning elections and not much else, I approach this question of his and our responsibility for other people's terrorisms in a fairly cool and detached way.

My starting point is a conversation I had at the time of the first (successful) Gulf War with the late J. B. Kelly, the Middle East scholar who wrote the magisterial Arabia, the Gulf, and the West shortly after the oil shock of 1974 and who later became a valued regular contributor to NATIONAL REVIEW. John had been a pupil of the great Orientalist scholar Bernard Lewis when younger, and by the 1960s he was one of a small circle of Middle Eastern scholars who were skeptical of what his friend Elie Kedourie called "the Chatham House version" (i.e., a baselessly optimistic viewpoint) of post-Ottoman history in the Arab world.

Remembering the 1960s from the standpoint of 1991, John recalled that when he and his fellow scholars returned from their long summer trips to the Middle East, they reported to each other that something unusual was happening in Arab societies.

The veil seemed to be making a comeback in universities and middle-class life. Open religiosity had been taboo in intellectual circles; but now some of their old contacts (a minority but a growing one) were openly pious. Organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood were repressed by an efficient secret-police apparatus, but their existence was still evident from street slogans and wall newspapers. And the political ideologies that competed with Islam (without acknowledging that they did so) — namely, Arab nationalism and Arab socialism under leaders such as Gamel Abdul Nasser — *had been replaced by cynicism and despair as Arab economies continued to stagnate*, Israel won the wars that the Arab world started, and the autocrats ruled by filling the prisons with more and more dissidents.

All these trends that Kelly and others noticed in the 1960s grew stronger as the 20th century wore on.

Did the West respond with hostility and aggression to them? Not in the least.

They responded to what seemed to be the political and social problems of the Middle East *with foreign aid, including military aid, and with diplomatic pressure on Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians*.

Admittedly, they didn't go along with attempts to defeat Israel or seek to overthrow non-democratic Arab regimes (i.e., all of them), but refraining from such interventions hardly amounts to anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hostility.

Nor could Western leaders have been guilty of opposing the trend toward Islamism because, like most scholars outside Kelly's circle, they were unaware of it until after the Cold War and the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan.

It is clear in retrospect that radical Islamism began to emerge 30 years before the First Gulf War and 40 years before the Second. *And since an effect cannot precede its own cause, Blair and Co. are not responsible for ISIS or Boko Haram.*

Unfortunately for the Arab world, that's not the end of the matter.

The rise of Islamism was bound to promote violent conflict not with the West, at least initially, but within the Muslim world. In the first place, the claims of Islamism include political ones and, as such, they threaten existing regimes in Muslim countries.

An Islamic caliphate is a reproach and a rival to regimes such as the current Egyptian one. In the second place, since Islam is divided between Sunni and Shiite Islam, the rise of Islamism was likely to produce two sorts of Islamism and thus to encourage competing political claims and violent clashes between them.

An Islamism rooted in Shiite Islam is a reproach and a rival to regimes like the Saudi one. And if a state is divided between Sunni and Shiite Islam, as Iraq is, then the rise of Islamism is likely to promote its division into two or more separate states — which indeed may be the most practicable solution to the conflicts that will inevitably arise.

That at least was John Kelly's conclusion in the article he wrote for NATIONAL REVIEW in 1991. You can read it in one of the two recent volumes of John's essays collected by his son, Saul Kelly, also a historian of the Middle East:

S. B. Kelly ed., *Fighting the Retreat from Arabia and the Gulf: The Collected Essays and Reviews of J.B. Kelly, Vol.1* and *The Oil Cringe of the West: The Collected Essays and Reviews of J. B. Kelly, Vol.2.*

For the record, John had a low opinion of Blair and he was firmly opposed to the Second Gulf War. But he wasn't in the grip of Western self-hatred, and he saw things clearly. Also he never wrote a dull sentence in his life.

I doubt he would have much influence in today's Washington.

— *John O'Sullivan is an editor-at-large of NATIONAL REVIEW*