Is the War-on-Terror Really a Crusade Against Islam?

Now that the Brussels attacks have moved down the list of things to watch on TV and the War-on-Terror is ready to be resumed, I would like to use this opportunity to reflect on the back-story, without however necessarily reverting to conspiracy theories as touted by the ever-willing-to-do-so Sibel Edmonds. Rather than understand the airport and metro assaults as yet another False Flag operation, engineered by the CIA or the American Empire, I would like to draw your attention to the somewhat shadowy figures of the former NATO chief Willy Claes and the one-time White House National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski (aka Zbig).

The 21st century will stand out as the era in human history when God returned back to centre stage after religious beliefs, prejudices and superstitions had supposedly been confined to the dustbin of history following the end of World War II. In the aftermath of the fall of Communism, however, christianity made a particularly remarkable comeback, first in the previously Communist realm of Eastern Europe and Russia and then in Western Europe as well. In this way, Europe accelerated its ideological drift towards America, where great swathes of the population (inclusive of their political leadership) have traditionally been pious believers and devout Christians. But suddenly, at the very outset of the 21st century, on 11 September 2001, to be precise, christianity found itself stuck in a war with Islamist radicals... but, is it really this simple or is the current spike in so-called Muslim terrorism the outcome of rather cynical political moves and machinations set in motion during the final decades of the previous century?

Setting the Stage: Denouncing a Crusade against Islam

The Catholic theologian-acting-as-public intellectual George Weigel has described God's return to public and private life as the "unsecularization of the world," calling it "one of the dominant social factors of life in the late twentieth century" and arguably beyond. But this "unsecularization" has taken on an extreme urgency in the Muslim world, as evidenced by the current preponderance of Islamic terrorism all around, some would argue. After the Charlie Hebdo attacks, I suggested that the chickens have now finally come home to roost. And that Willy Claes' prophetic or rather programmatic 1995 sentences have now become a deadly reality, potentially affecting each and everyone today . . .

As a reminder, let me recall here that the then-NATO Secretary General literally said the following: “Islamic militancy has emerged as perhaps the single gravest threat to the NATO alliance and to Western security” . . . and that these Extremist Muslims oppose “the basic principles of civilization that bind North America and Western Europe.” At the time, Claes realized the potentially explosive and belligerent tone of his voice and quickly added that his declarations should not be seen as a call for “a crusade against Islam.” The NATO Secretary General made his announcements arguably fully cognizant of Brzezinski's important groundwork in the seventies, groundwork that saw the somewhat concealed mobilization of Islam as a weapon against Communism. Liberal U.S. support and funding in conjunction with Saudi collusion and coaxing of various Islamist factions across the globe took place during the administrations of U.S. Presidents Carter, Reagan, and Clinton -- from Afghanistan over Pakistan to Turkey (and Bosnia), to name but a few salient locations.

Now that the world is burning brightly in the bonfire of what I would like to call Zbig's vanities, it seems reasonable to wonder whether Jimmy Carter's erstwhile National Security Adviser entertains any regrets or bad feelings. Speaking with the French Le Nouvel Observateur in 1998, he retorted defiantly: "Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it?"
The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter. We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire." Before pronouncing these words, Brzezinski told his interviewer how the U.S. administration had covertly started supporting the Mujahadeen in order to provoke the Soviets to intervene militarily in Afghanistan, the proverbial "Graveyard of Empires" (according to the phrase attributed to the Afghan intellectual Mahmud Tarzi, 1865-1933). And, Zbig further reasoned, the Soviet Vietnam in the Hindu Kush led directly to the economic collapse of the USSR and the fall of Communism. Whether Zbig still feels the same today is anyone's guess . . . back in 1998, he continued by posing this arguably rhetorical question: "What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?" Even though Zbig himself appeared to underestimate the impact of his work and was happy to talk about "[s]ome stirred-up Moslems" in reference to the fallout caused by his aggressive meddling in the world, critical minds can easily detect a somewhat straight line connecting the Mujahadeen, Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Islamic State. From the now-defunct Mullah Omar over the equally defunct Usamah bin Laden to the now quite active Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, these men have all enjoyed some modicum of the Free World's support in their day, as proscribed by Jimmy Carter's National Security Adviser.

The War-on-Terror: Fighting a Fringe Form of Islamic Extremism

In the mid-nineties Claes was effectively swimming in the intellectual current of Samuel P. Huntington (1927-2008) and his Clash of Civilizations' thesis, first proposed in 1993. At that stage, when Communism had just crumbled and many people lost their ideological and philosophical bearings, leaving them with a huge hole in their souls, Huntington put forward that "[i]n much of the world religion has moved in to fill this gap, often in the form of movements that are labeled 'fundamentalist.' Such movements are found in Western Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as in Islam." In this way, one could reason, Claes felt at ease to elaborate upon Zbig's groundwork and in this way, the world received a new generic bogeyman, the Muslim Extremist -- a blanket figure but needed adequate personification in due course. Previously, the Cold War had provided ample ideological justification for greasing the wheels of the Military-Industrial Complex (aka Mic, as suggested by Dennis Trainor, Jr). The Cold War dominated the second half of the previous century affecting most aspects of people's everyday lives for about fifty years. But then, the sudden disappearance of the Godless Commie left the powers-that-be of the Free World at a loss. And that is where Willy Claes came in with his declarations. And, one could argue, stating that NATO's operations should not be understood as "a crusade against Islam" is as good as tantamount to admitting that the Alliance was actually fully intent on doing just that. The political scientist Ryan C. Hendrickson explains that "[s]ince the Soviet Union's collapse, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has undergone tremendous change. The [A]lliance has enlarged, has adopted new roles in crisis management and peacekeeping, and has forged new relationships with its former enemies in the Warsaw Pact." And, as Secretary General, Willy Claes was instrumental "in moving NATO's agenda toward more aggressive military options in 1995" and beyond. But, the Free World and NATO had to wait for six more years to receive the ultimate impetus to become really active in military terms. U.S. President George W. Bush then declared that "[t]oday our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts." Bush, Jr. spoke these momentous words on 11 September 2001 at 8:30 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

Nine days later President Bush took up the gauntlet for real, addressing a joint session of Congress and the nation as a whole. He presented a shadowy organization known only as "al-Qaida" (harking back to his predecessor Bill Clinton and the 1998 African Embassy bombings) and elaborated that these "terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics; a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam." The new Pearl Harbor-that-was-9/11 provided Bush with a suitable stage to practice his rhetorical muscle, freely elaborating upon Claes' words. Bush zoomed in on Islam, albeit a perverted version thereof, and then painted the scope of his ambitions: "[o]ur war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there . . . There are thousands of these terrorists in more than 60 countries." Adding that this War-on-Terror "will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated." In spite of the grave circumstances, keeping in mind the thousands that perished in the Twin Towers, in Washington, DC as well as in a field in Pennsylvania, Bush, Jr. sounded eerily happy when he concluded that "we have found our mission and our moment."

Grieving the Victims and Counting the Costs

In his Neoconservative and Born-Again-Christian zeal, Bush, Jr. easily unleashed the dogs of war, first honing in on the Hindu Kush (Afghanistan and Pakistan) and in the next instance, turning his attention to Saddam Hussein and
Iraq (ostensibly for more personal and financial reasons). His successor, the Nobel Peace Prize-wielding Barack Obama all but continued the wars begun by Bill Clinton's heir. And a little more than a year ago, the IPPNW, in conjunction with its German and Canadian affiliates, released a damning report presenting the effective outcome of the Bush-declared war effort. Appropriately entitled Body Count, with the telling subtitle of ‘Casualty Figures after 10 Years of the “War on Terror”’. Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan,' the report aims to “provide as realistic an estimate as possible of the total body count in the three main war zones Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan during 12 years of ‘war on terrorism’.” And, right off the bat, the compilers' report "comes to the conclusion that the war has, directly or indirectly, killed around 1 million people in Iraq, 220,000 in Afghanistan and 80,000 in Pakistan, i.e. a total of around 1.3 million." But then immediately adding that the "total number of deaths in the three countries named above could also be in excess of 2 million, whereas a figure below 1 million is extremely unlikely." The profits accrued by the Military-Industrial Complex in the same period can only be described as astronomical. For instance, a company like UTC or United Technologies reported a profit of $6.22 billion, only for the fiscal year 2014. In the year prior to 9/11, U.S. defense budget stood at a meagre $312 billion, but a decade later, in 2011, that figure ballooned to $712 billion.

The Bush-Obama Wars thus proved highly lucrative for some yet utterly deadly for others, mainly Muslims and particularly those living in Hindu Kush (Afghanistan and Pakistan) and Iraq. President Obama’s spin doctors even renamed the war effort into the Overseas Contingency Operation, in an apparent effort to downplay the fact that these U.S.-initiated wars really constitute a “crusade” against Fringe Form of Islamic Extremism. And, even though, Obama made good on his promise to bring the overt war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq to an end, residual troops and other warlike enterprises all but underline that the Nobel Peace Prize-wielding U.S. President is acting like a veritable war president. A war president personally overseeing “a 'secret kill list,' a directory of names and photos of individuals targeted for assassination in the US drone war or deadly strike campaign carried out by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV).” In addition, Obama also utilizes the "shadowy and powerful Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)" as a means of “finding, fixing and finishing” (as expressed in military jargon) targets "selected through a secret process". This means that President Obama has been routinely authorizing the use of lethal force against "perceived terror threats in Somalia, Yemen and elsewhere," perceived threats that always happen to consist of Muslim men (and their dependants). In this way, President Obama effectively ensures that Zbig’s "stirred-up Moslems" continually receive new recruits willing and able to carry out acts of terror, killing and maiming innocents all around. In this context, last January, Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations (or CFR) Micah Zenko published a most interesting blog post. Zenko namely states that last year, the U.S. dropped an "estimated total of 23,144 bombs in six countries." And those six countries are Syria and Iraq, where the Caliph and his jolly band of IS warriors seem to constitute “legitimate” targets, but also Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as Somalia and Yemen. . . or, all countries with a predominantly Muslim population.

Blowback: From Al Qaeda to the Islamic State

Now the world is well and truly ablaze, as the appearance of the terror group formerly known as ISIS and now calling itself the Islamic State (or IS) has completely changed the game. On 13 January, Syria’s Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem told a press conference in New Delhi that “[w]e’re beginning to see terrorism backfiring on the states that supported it like France and the United States, and yesterday Turkey, and before that Saudi Arabia.” Muallem was in India for a 4-day visit to discuss trade and energy ties between Damascus and Delhi. Quite naturally, Syria’s not-so civil war also on the agenda. As expressed by Walid al-Muallem, the recent Paris attacks and the very recent Brussels and even Lahore bombings as well as Ankara and Istanbul assaults all but confirm my above-mentioned suggestions. The perpetrators of these acts of terror all have their adherence to a violent interpretation of Islam (or, if you will, to a Fringe Form of Islamic Extremism) in common, an allegiance that functions as a cover for a purely nihilistic ideology bent on utter and sheer destruction for its own sake.

In this way, Bush, Jr.’s 2001 words have become a self-fulfilling prophecy today, as random acts of terror continue unabated and the War-on-Terror persistently reacts accordingly. On the other hand, Willy Claes, appearing on the Dutch-language Belgian state Broadcaster VRT following the Brussels attacks, declared that these terror assaults were not "foreseeable," as if he himself had not been party to creating the image of "Islamic military" as the West's new bogeyman. In 2006, his predecessor-in-crime, Zbigniew Brzezinski, could still safely claim that “[r]adical Islam is such an anonymous phenomenon that has arisen in some countries and not in others. It has to be taken seriously, but it is still only a regional danger most prevalent in the Middle East and somewhat east of the Middle East." But, not anymore now that the IS has clearly declared a “War-on-Kuffar,” wherever they may be, as I suggested some time ago. There is thus no end in sight . . . after all, "every terrorist group of global reach" needs to be “found, stopped and defeated." The 2001 mission statement therefore guarantees that the present War-on-Terror (or Crusade against a Fringe Form of Islamic Extremism) will necessarily continue ad infinitum and that “[s]ome stirred-
up Moslems" will always feel the need to defend the lands of Islam against the Free World and NATO encroaching, in whatever locality possible and/or feasible.

Dr. Can Erimtan is an independent scholar residing in İstanbul, with a wide interest in the politics, history and culture of the Balkans and the Greater Middle East, especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”