Militant Islamist Movements in Egypt, Afghanistan and Iran during the Cold War

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In recent years, a growing number of scholars have analysed the events of the Cold War[1] through a pericentric lens; that is, instead of focusing on the events of the conflict at their core, scholars are beginning to 'understand the conflict by studying how it played out in the periphery'.[2] The Middle East is one of these peripheral zones. Though there were no hot conflicts between the superpowers in the region, a close look at the respective foreign policies of the United States and Soviet Russia towards the Middle East shows that many diplomatic battles were fought over the area. This paper will show that the relationship forged between the regional players and the superpowers was fluid and changeable. It will be argued that, regardless of the nature of the relationships discussed, the confrontation between the superpowers left behind a profound legacy in the Middle East in the form of the popularisation of radical strains of Islamism.

After the term Islamism has been broadly defined, this paper will proceed in three parts. First, Egypt's experience with the Cold War will be tracked, looking specifically at the 1967 war and its aftermath and positing that this event was much exacerbated by the superpowers. Secondly, the evolution of a new trend of Islamism, global jihadism, will be traced from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan. It is contended that it emerged largely because of the proxy war waged there by the superpowers. Thirdly, the evolution of the circumstances that led to the Islamic Revolution in Iran will be investigated. It is argued that the revolution was largely a product of the US' unwavering support for the oppressive monarchy of the shah. As Mirjam Sørli et al have noted, 'there is little about Islam *per se* that accounts for the growth of political Islam';[3] it is therefore necessary to look at exogenous factors to better understand its rise. Thus I will conclude that, though radical Islamism did not emerge solely as the offspring of the superpower confrontation, it was profoundly affected by the Soviet Union and the United States' rivalry.

Before any further discussion, it is imperative that the term "Islamism" is defined. Loosely, an Islamist believes that 'Islam should guide social and political as well as personal life',[4] that Islam does not play an important enough role if it is just a spiritual belief. However, this paper concerns a more nuanced version of Islamism that is an 'ideological critique of the secular nation state in the Middle East',[5] where its primary goal is to 'get rid of, or at least lessen, western [or eastern] influence'[6] and that seeks immediate change to the global status quo: radical Islamism. It was this trend that was most affected by the Cold War confrontation.

Egypt and the Cold War

By tracking the experience of Islamism in Egypt across three decades of the Cold War, one can begin to understand the relationships Egypt mustered with both the United States and the Soviet Union, neither of which fits exactly into either of Efraim Karsh's paradigms of Cold War international relations: a client-patron relationship or an interaction where the tail wags the dog.[7] However, the ebb and flow of superpower influence, though it never directly interacted with the Islamist trend, certainly nurtured the conditions in which it thrived.

When the Free Officers Movement, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, swept into power in 1952 Egypt's political landscape

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was transformed, and with it 'a process of [secular] radicalisation affected Egypt as well as the Arab world'.[8] Alliance with such an influential leader as the Pan-Arabist Nasser[9] was desirable for both superpowers; if either gained his loyalty, they would be within reach of uncontested hegemony in the Middle East. Nasser fostered the most complicated of relationships with the superpowers; indeed, eminent scholar of international relations Fred Halliday cites him as the man who 'brought the Cold War to the Arab world',[10] as is outlined below. In 1954, plans for the High Aswan Dam began to take shape. Both of the superpowers were quick to show that they would provide financial support for the massive project, but this was not enough for Nasser – he recognised that, by playing the superpowers against one another, Egypt could secure huge amounts of aid (not just financial) from each.[11] He thus integrated his military ambitions into the bargaining process, but, failing to win over American support, he turned to the Soviets. In 1955, he completed the Czech Arms Deal, a moment that confounded the Eisenhower administration and demonstrated that Egypt would be no straightforward ally to either superpower. The following year, Nasser rose to the forefront of Middle Eastern politics; he became the symbol of the secular nationalist system's success after he triumphed over the British, French and Israelis during the Suez Crisis. Adeed Dawisha contends that Eisenhower stuck by Egypt during the crisis because he feared that alignment with Israel at this stage would 'push nationalist groups towards the Soviet Union',[12] though it is also likely that he sought to undermine the British position in the Middle East in order to gain greater influence over the region's oil reserves.

In 1954, an attempt on Nasser's life known as the Manshiyya incident sparked brutal oppression of the Muslim Brotherhood. In this context, the Brotherhood's doctrine was exported to Saudi Arabia, where many sought refuge. 'The need for qualified educators, [King] Faisal's struggle against Egyptian-led pan-Arab radicalism, and Saudi openness [for Islamism's political evolution] under King Khaled'[13] meant that there, Egyptian Islamists would go from strength to strength. The Cold War had no bearing on the Brotherhood's experience under Nasser, but it is necessary to mention it because of the profound impact it had on Saudi Arabian Islamism, which will be discussed in section II. These other watershed moments during Nasser's reign are intrinsic to the rise of Egyptian Islamism, though they may not at first appear to be so. The perception of Nasser as champion of the Arabs and the popularisation of secular Arab nationalism set the scene for an almighty fall from grace that affected not only Nasser's prestige but devastated his nationalist ideology as well: the Six-Day War.

The superpowers had an important role in the lead up to the 1967 war. It was the USSR and the USA that provided the military means to both sides for war on such a massive scale. Regardless of Nasser's oppressive anti-communist policies – which political scientist Malik Mufti contends were 'to curry US favor'[14] – from 1963, the United States' relations with Egypt began to sour. The US feared that Nasser's socialist policies 'had opened the door to the Soviets in the area'[15] and thus began the 'inexorable process of disintegration'.[16] At the same time, the US started to improve its relationship with Israel, which 'seemed to be falling behind in the arms race';[17] aid to the country increased massively over the next few years (in 1963 Israel received $44.2 million in US military assistance, compared to $995.3 million in 1968).[18] Meanwhile, the Arab world was being supplied huge amounts of military aid and training from the USSR. Thus, the 1967 war was a war of proxies, though neither superpower could have averted its taking place. That was down to Nasser overestimating his strength and seeking 'another quick fix to restore him to his past glory'.[19] He had been lulled into a false sense of confidence by the knowledge that nowhere else was the Soviet Union 'so actively and massively engaged'[20] when he announced in May 1967: 'Our basic objective is the destruction of Israel. The Arab people want to fight'.[21]

The outcome of the war was disastrous for Arab nationalism. Whereas in the west it was seen as a 'victory for a US proxy over those of the Soviets',[22] in the Middle East it symbolised the greatest failure of Arab nationalism. Many Egyptians sought an immediate alternative, so joined the ranks of the Islamists, who viewed the 1967 war as a 'punishment for the misplaced trust in the promise of alien ideologies'.[23] Anwar Sadat replaced Nasser, who died in 1970, as president. Under him, Islamism's popularisation was further compounded by the outcome of the 1973 Yom Kippur War (good for Egypt, bad for Arab nationalists), another episode where superpower military aid exacerbated an already vicious conflict; indeed, by this stage, both superpowers had 'little choice but to deliver'[24] arms to their respective clients.

While the widespread sense of humiliation that arose in the aftermath of Egypt's wars with Israel was a key factor that led to Islamism's rise, it was not the only one. In fact, Sadat encouraged the Islamization of society in an attempt

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to counterbalance his weak power base among Nasserists and lack of national popularity: as well as giving amnesty to a great number of Muslim Brothers, Islam became the state religion and *shariʿa* 'a source of legislation'.[25] In attempting to secure Islamist allegiance, Sadat had effectively given away the 'state's monopoly on ideology'.[26] James Toth also cites the underdevelopment and poor socioeconomic conditions that came as results of Sadat's process of economic alignment with the west (the *infitāḥ*) as being a 'midwife to contemporary Islamism'.[27] Another turning point in Sadat's presidency was Egypt's peace with Israel, reached at Camp David in 1979. It was interpreted by many as 'humiliation by a tiny hated enemy [and the consolidation of] dependence on an alien power'[28] and gave radical Islamism yet more momentum. The event remained unforgiven, and eventually led to Sadat's assassination by the fundamentalist group Tanẕīm al-Jihād in 1981.

So, to what extent was Islamism affected by the Cold War confrontation? Halliday argues that no development of ideology was 'centrally reliant on the Cold War',[29] and the political scientist Adeed Dawisha agrees, stating that major changes 'had little, if anything to do with the Cold War'.[30] Tentatively, I disagree. Certainly, Nasser's popularity was not a product of the Cold War; it was a reaction to the colonial experience of the Middle East, something that would capture the imagination of the masses across the region after the Suez Crisis of 1956, the point at which the Cold War was imported to the Arab world. From this moment, both superpowers would play a huge role in the economic and military development of the region. Though the 1967 war was the outcome of forces that had their roots firmly planted in the Middle East, it would not have escalated to such a degree were the superpowers not 'stoking the arms race'[31] in an attempt to gain regional predominance. This involvement created an aura of invincibility about Israel, and one of deep weakness and humiliation for the Arabs, who would 'blame themselves and their leaders',[32] eventually turning towards Islam as an antidote for their ills. The unilateral pursuit of hegemony engaged in by both superpowers provided 'constant reminders of Arab disempowerment',[33] and laid fertile ground for an Islamist movement that sought to cut off these damaging, "neo-imperialist" ties.

The Birth of Global Jihadism: the United States, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan

During the Cold War, Islam was 'an important part of the American ideological arsenal'[34] in the fight against communism, because of its rejection of the latter's principle of atheism. Never would this tool be harnessed as directly as it was following the Red Army's deployment in Afghanistan in the last days of 1979. However, it is first important to see how the United States encouraged Islam's development as a form of anti-communist resistance in the decades that preceded the Afghan-Soviet war.

For much of the second half of the 20th century, Islamism was 'kindly looked upon by the western bloc'[35] as a counterweight to Arab socialism, which the west came to fear during Nasser's heyday (Eisenhower's secretary of state John Foster Dulles dismissed non-aligned nationalist states Syria and Egypt as communist dupes).[36] For this reason, pro-western monarchies like Saudi Arabia were strongly backed by the United States. The Saudi regime had the added bonus of what political scientist Peter Mandaville terms 'religious outreach':[37] a loyal Saudi Arabia, promoting Islamic, anti-atheist virtues to pilgrims from across the world, could at the same time act as a check to the spread of communist ideas among the Muslim people. Thus, the Arab Cold War, in which Soviet-backed nationalist-socialist states like Egypt and Syria were pitted against western bloc-backed conservative monarchies like Saudi Arabia and Jordan, became a loose war of proxies. Halliday makes the interesting observation that events in the wider Arab world in the fifties and sixties mirrored those in Iran: 'the impact of a modern, secular state [Soviet-backed Nasser] was met by a rising Islamic resistance'[38] backed by the west, which had not yet come to view Islamism as a threat.

Now, the most direct use of Islam by the United States as an anti-communist bludgeon will be discussed. These events have come to be the most clear cut case of the superpower confrontation having a direct impact upon the Islamist trend (in this case globalising a revival of defensive *jihād*). In December of 1979, the Red Army was deployed *en masse* in Afghanistan at the request of the imperilled communist regime in Kabul. Initially ignored by its Soviet patron in April 1979, the Afghan government became, over the rest of the year, more desperate in its requests for military aid in putting down the Islamist-led rebellion that had been gathering momentum since Mohammad Daoud's violent overthrow in 1978.

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Shortly after Hafizullah Amin – who was beginning to 'show signs of independence from Moscow'[39] – was assassinated and replaced by the Soviet 'Trojan horse'[40] Babrak Karmal in 1979, the Red Army was deployed in Afghanistan to quell the rest of the rebellion. The motive behind this deployment is something much contested. Journalist Robert Fisk suggests that, at the time, popular thought was that the deployment took place because of the expansionist desires of the ailing Soviet Union. American historian Andrew Hartman conversely suggested that the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan because it 'feared the spread of this [Islamic fundamentalist] phenomenon into the Muslim Central Asian republics of the USSR',[41] and their subsequent destabilization. This was a very real threat in light of the great gains that Islamism had made in the 1970s and the recent success of the Iranian revolution. Regardless of the motive of the deployment, whether it was Soviet expansionism or an attempt to maintain the status quo, at least 85,000 troops were stationed in Afghanistan.[42] This provoked a prompt reaction out of the Americans, despite the fact that, up until 1979, 'Afghanistan barely figured in the US foreign policy map'.[43] In an attempt to undermine Soviet regional influence, or stop it from growing, the United States had become engaged in another war of proxies; it stepped up support for the religious anti-communist insurgency and began 'the most expensive covert operation since Vietnam'.[44]

The United States provided financial backing to the Islamist rebels, initially proving reluctant to equip them with American weapons in order to preserve a sense of deniability. Islam, through Saudi Arabia, was again harnessed by the west as an anti-communist instrument. With the Saudis matching the US' financial contributions dollar for dollar, the administrations of Carter and then Reagan funded the Islamist insurgency and worked to revive the tradition of a defensive *jihād*.[45] The *mujahidūn*, as they came to be known, were supplied with weaponry and trained by Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), who acted as CIA proxies. In this aiding and abetting of the insurgency that would help diminish the strategic threat that the USSR posed, Saudi Arabia was also able to deflect and export the Islamist opposition that it was facing at the time to the ongoing struggle in Afghanistan (Osama bin Laden was, of course, amongst these undesirable elements). By 1985, thousands of foreign fighters ("Afghan Arabs") had joined the ranks of their Afghan co-religionists in fighting the Soviet occupation, and it was at this point that the United States 'removed the fig leaf of deniability'[46] and started to ship western weapons to Afghanistan. Reagan had decided that it was not enough to encourage difficulties for the Soviets; he wanted to bring about their full withdrawal. Blind funding and the open promotion of Islamic militancy – the CIA was working to 'integrate guerrilla training with teachings of Islam'[47] – eventually succeeded in forcing the Soviet Union to withdraw. However, they were also to bring about an unwanted, dangerous evolution within radical Islamism, as will be discussed below.

The Afghan Arabs were a phenomenon that was the product of Pakistani, Saudi and American efforts. These were recruits from across the Muslim world (including Indonesia – "Arab" is a misnomer) who had come to Afghanistan to fight against the force that was seen to be attacking the Muslim world, the USSR. Though they are not likely to have made too significant an impact upon the outcome of the Afghan-Soviet war, 'the Afghan jihad came to influence more than 100,000 Muslim radicals'.[48] Many of these radicals treated the war as military training; they had come with the intention of preparing for domestic *jihād* against the near enemy in their own countries. The camps at which they were trained became doctrinal melting pots; indeed 'many unexpected ideological cross-fertilizations and grafts emerged'.[49] It was in this context that Osama bin Laden arrived in Afghanistan, where he would develop his doctrine of global *jihād* with the Palestinian *mujahid* Abdullah Azzam, 'by far the most influential foreign fighter ideologue'.[50] The Cold War confrontation, in this respect, fostered the creation of a new current of Islamism. Whereas, previous to 1980, 'practically all militant Islamist groups fought for regime change in their respective countries',[51] this trend was focused on repelling foreign aggression.

Afghanistan provided a battleground for the Soviet Union and the United States upon which they conducted a prolonged war. Through the tried-and-tested technique of financial support and military training, the US succeeded in ousting the Soviets. Indeed, many 'credit the eventual fall of the Soviet Union to the covert war with Afghanistan',[52] however, there was a price to pay for such an achievement. The insurgents of Afghanistan did not just drop their weapons at the moment that the Red Army withdrew. Fighting continued, and Afghanistan was left in a state worse than when the Soviets first arrived in 1979. Amidst this disarray emerged the Taliban, a movement that the Americans initially supported, expecting it to be similar to their Saudi allies.[53] However, the Taliban were the product of many years of war and foreign domination; the United States was mistaken. Thus, Afghanistan, which the Americans first feared would become a launching pad for communism, became the 'launching pad for jihad

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worldwide'[54] instead.

The Cold War confrontation in Afghanistan was a turning point for radical Islamism from which global jihadism emerged. Indeed, political scientist and Middle East specialist Fawaz Gerges contends that 'it is doubtful that transnational jihad would have materialized without the prolonged Afghan war'.[55] Additionally, militant Islamist ideologies propagated within the training camps would find their way across the Muslim world, and play important roles in insurgencies like that of Egypt and civil wars – most notably Algeria – across the next two decades.

Islamism in Iran and the Cold War

It would be wrong to claim that the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 was a direct outcome of the Cold War rivalry; rather, it was the manifestation of a 'rejection by the mass of the population of both a century of foreign domination and of a corrupt "foreign-connected" government'.[56] As Halliday explains, the reason that Ayatollah Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini's Islamist movement attained political power in Iran was a legacy of foreign intervention, largely on the part of the Americans. Below, it will be shown that the Cold War rivalry was partly responsible for the rise of radical Iranian Islamism, influencing it from as far back as 1953.

In any study of the 1979 revolution, one must take into account the lasting effects of the 1953 CIA-led coup that ousted the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, which the American historian Rashid Khalidi has dubbed 'the quintessential case'[57] of the superpowers' failure to promote democracy. The coup of 1953 set off the forces that would culminate, in two and a half decades time, in the demise of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. A direct result of the secrecy that shrouds the coup is the inability to know, definitively, what the true motives behind it were. It has been analysed by some through the prism of the Cold War dichotomy: Eisenhower announced shortly after Mossadegh's deposal that it was an Iranian 'fear of communism that saved the day'.[58] Farhang Jahanpour, in his 1984 article, argues that it was 'mainly the fear of a Tudeh [Iran's communist party] take-over that made western powers support the military coup'.[59] An alternative analysis of the coup contends that the United States' involvement was down to British demands that they continue to maintain 'virtually absolute control over Iranian oil production',[60] coupled with Eisenhower's paranoia of Soviet expansionism. Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh nationalised the British-dominated oil industry in 1951 (an event known as the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis), which crippled the imperial power's influence in the region and impaired it economically. Britain repeatedly requested Washington's help in deposing Mossadegh, demands that initially fell on deaf ears but had more success with the Republican administration that came to power in 1953, with its heightened fear of communist expansionism: Eisenhower's aforementioned secretary of state Dulles is said to have 'looked moralistically on any nationalisation of private property as natural steps toward the horrors of socialism and communism'.[61] Whatever the rationale behind it, just eight months after Eisenhower's inauguration a US-British covert operation toppled Mossadegh and, for the foreseeable future, 'destroyed Iranian democracy'.[62]

The Cold War dynamic led to decades of the United States' almost unconditional support for the reinstalled, and increasingly savage, shah. By bringing about his return, the Americans effectively bought his and the Iranian administration's loyalty as a client state; in removing Mossadegh, the threat of politics that could 'undermine the shah's commitment to the west'[63] was also removed. The coup also proved to 'lock Iran into the Cold War alliance system',[64] a position from which it was difficult to manoeuvre out of. The shah soon came to be regarded as an indispensable US ally in the Middle East, though he also had, like many other leaders at the time, dealings with the Soviets.[65] Security of Iranian oil was fundamental to the stability and security of the United States' western allies and for this reason Iran was the recipient of much aid as well as international backing while the shah consolidated his power under the pretence of crushing subversive communist forces. In the west's eyes, a stable and dependable ally required 'a strong centre'.[66]. Thus, the fear of Soviet proxies having the potential to subvert the shah's monarchy meant that the west was willing to turn a blind eye to the notoriously murderous activities of SAVAK, Iran's notorious secret police. It was with SAVAK's help – and tacit western approval – that the shah effectively removed any feasible form of political opposition in Iran. Pluralism was one of the most significant casualties of the Cold War rivalry, and it was out of its absence that the radical Islamist opposition emerged.

While democratization was being forced further onto the horizon, the shah was making pains to transform the Iranian

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economy and cement its alignment with the west. The White Revolution of 1963 was a series of reforms that were aimed at westernising Iran's economy and society, but instead exacerbated a 'growing strain in state-society relations'[67] because the shah was attempting to transform his country too rapidly. This strain evolved into secular opposition to the monarchy's domestic policies, which became the 'principal motor for the revolution'.[68] In the same year as the White Revolution, an obscure theologian, Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini, denounced the six-point plan for reform. He condemned the shah's rule and its initiatives, saying that they laid Iran open to dangerous westernizing trends. His denunciation fell upon the sympathetic ears of the Iranian people, and the shah felt compelled to exile him to Iraq to silence what had become one of the opposition's most potent voices. It was at this point that 'popular anger confirmed Khomeini as a national opposition leader'.[69] The Ayatollah's attack on foreign interference in Iran's domestic policies and the west's support for the oppressive regime struck a chord with the disenfranchised population, whose grievances he expressed through the language of Islam. Thus, his base of support would rapidly expand after his exile.

The revolution was initiated by small demonstrations by the middle classes that were manifestations of economic discontent, which gradually snowballed into much larger ones involving the working classes as well. The demonstrators, spurred on by the anti-regime clergy, began to make political, not just economic demands, despite brutal government oppression. The uprising was so widespread, and the relief at the shah's fall on 17 January 1979 so overwhelming, that at the time one reporter 'favourably compared the revolution to both the 1789 fall of the Bastille and the 1917 overthrow of the Tsar'.[70] Regardless of its nature, it was at this point that all the efforts of the United States and Britain in 1953 came crashing down. When Khomeini returned from exile two weeks after the shah's fall, he began to consolidate his power and pursue a policy of non-alignment. He and his followers co-opted what had begun as a predominantly secular social uprising, and out of its success formed the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the years that followed the revolution, political pluralism, which seemed to have had a brief window of opportunity, once again fell victim to the central consolidation of power – this time under Khomeini.

The Iran-Iraq war, which began after Saddam Hussein ordered his troops to invade an unstable post-revolutionary Iran in 1980, signalled the end of the Cold War in the Middle East; 'the main line of division and conflict was [no longer] that of the Cold War, but that between the Islamic revolutionary movement in Iran and the states opposed to it'.[71] Both the United States and the Soviets, fearing the possibility of Iran's regional hegemony, favoured Iraq in the eight year war in which over one million died. However, against the odds, Iran's regime did not concede defeat. On the contrary, the Iranians rallied in the face of the Iraqi threat. Thus, Hussein's "whirlwind war" and his backing from both the US and the USSR helped Khomeini consolidate his power and further legitimised his radical ideology of non-alignment.

So, though the Iranian experience of Islamism is, like Egypt, not a direct result of the Cold War superpower rivalry, it was shaped by it. The Mossadegh coup of 1953 played a fundamental role in creating the circumstances within which Khomeini's Islamic movement would thrive. It was to be a 'nail in the coffin'[72] of the Iranian monarchy that was, through its oppression, paving 'the way for the emergence of Khomeini's religious opposition'.[73] The Islamic Revolution of 1979, which to an extent came as a response to the legacy of western meddling in Iran, was a watershed for Islamist movements across the Middle East; it showed that 'a believing people could topple the mightiest oppressor',[74] lending ideological momentum – and promising financial and military backing – to many nascent militant Islamist groups, like Ḥizbullah, encouraging them to turn theory into practice. Following the revolution, autocratic regimes were to face a wave of Islamist-driven unrest, and their patron superpowers were to fear it; indeed, their backing of regimes was beginning to seem as if it had 'served exactly the opposite purpose',[75] and contributed to the creation of widespread, and deep-rooted, instability.

Concluding Remarks

Having examined Islamism in Egypt, Afghanistan and Iran, it has been demonstrated that the superpower rivalry had a fundamental impact upon its growth and popularisation. The rivalry did not interact with Islamism across the Muslim world in the same way, nor was its influence constant; however, there is no question that the geopolitical spillover effects of the Cold War – as well as the regional players' ability to play the superpowers off one another – most certainly contributed to the emergence of these three disparate branches of radical Islamism.

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In Egypt, the superpowers had a deeply important role to play in setting the political and economic scene within which radical Islamism would be popularised. Superpower backing of both sides meant that the outcome of the 1967 war was all the more damaging for those Arab states involved. Following such a grand failure, secular nationalism was logically superseded by Islamism. Subsequently, Egypt's forced modernisation and peace with Israel – both encouraged by the west – fanned the flames of discontent, ultimately leading many onto the path of radical Islamism that first emerged in Nasser's jails.

The actions of the superpowers in Afghanistan provide the clearest example of how the Cold War confrontation affected the rise of radical Islamism. The United States' retaliatory reaction, a reaction that involved funding and training militant Islamists, encouraging the revival of defensive *jihād*, only came about because of the Cold War dynamic. It has been shown that, rather ironically, the likes of Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden owe much to the superpower rivalry, particularly on the side of the United States. The conflict also fostered the nascent rejectionist ideologies of Algerians, Indonesians and Egyptians, ideologies that would go on to wreak havoc across the Muslim world in the years that followed the Soviet withdrawal.

Similarities may be drawn between the experiences of Egypt and Afghanistan, though, in the case of Iran, one must keep in mind that ideologically, Shiī and Sunni Islamism differ fundamentally, so to compare either of them with Iran's experience is a difficult task. However, there is no doubt that the United States, in seeking to reduce Soviet influence in the region, profoundly affected Iran politically, socially and economically. The 1953 coup – whether it was because of Eisenhower's fear of Soviet expansionism or not – derailed Iran's democratic experiment. In the years that followed, by turning a blind eye to the shah's oppressive policies, the west became discredited. The ballooning discontent of the Iranian people culminated in the revolution, which was subsequently co-opted by radical Islamists. This was largely because neither capitalism nor communism was held in high regard by the Iranian masses, a result of the nation's turbulent relationship with both in the preceding decades.

Each of the above case studies shows how the Cold War rivalry catalysed the rise of radical Islamism. Unconditional support of despotic regimes, the stoking of the regional arms race, the encouragement of grand modernisation projects that resulted in polarised economies and the direct funding of an Islamist insurgency all contributed to radical Islamism's rise. Both the Soviets and the United States played an important role in facilitating the circumstances in which these radical ideologies emerged, with the latter having a direct – though initially deniable – relationship with the forefathers of the infamous radical group al-Qāida. The Cold War's legacy still reverberates around the region today; one needs but a cursory glance at it today to see echoes of the conflict.

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