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Who Created This Monster?

By Walter Clemens
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Amid calls for *revanche*, a young French woman interviewed by the BBC asked, “Who created this monster?” Indeed, who or what gave life to a movement that revels in beheadings and mass executions of persons not committed to the new Caliphate? Does the fervor of Muslim extremists stem from passages in the *Koran*? Is it the result of brainwashing by serpent-tongued mullahs? The product of training manuals and social media calling on good Muslims to wreak havoc among the non-believers? What would extremists do without the weapons smuggled to France from the Balkans?

Each question is valid and suggests *part* of the answer. But few Westerners dwell on the roles played by their imperial past in fostering fanaticism and campaigns to destroy alien influences and recreate past glories.

French empire builders in the 19th century claimed a *mission civilatrice* to subdue and civilize the natives abroad; English leaders, a “white man’s burden”; Americans, a “manifest destiny.” Late-comer imperialists in Belgium, Germany, and elsewhere devised their own rationales.

Following the “Great War” France and Britain partitioned the Ottoman Empire and imposed the very problematic borders of today’s Middle East. Indifferent to ethnic and religious complexity, Europeans nurtured the seeds of today’s civil wars. In some places they put Sunnis under Shia domination; in others they mixed Muslims, Christians, and Jews and hoped to rule them from Paris or London. Aggravating other conflicts, Great Britain pledged self-rule to Arabs even as it promised a national homeland for Jews. When Israel became a state in 1948, London gifted Washington an enduring dilemma. U.S. policymakers sought to be “even handed,” but when push came to shove, Washington sided with Israel regardless the harm to America’s interests in the Arab world. The United States as well as Israel then became a target for Muslim activists.

Europeans gave to less developed countries a yearning for the bright toys of modern life—automobiles, refrigerators, air conditioning. They also implanted the idea that every people should shape its own destiny. Even though drained by World War II, European states sought to hold their colonies against drives for national self-determination. Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt in 1956 attempting to stop nationalization of the Suez Canal. Algeria, though nominally part of France, waged war for more than a dozen years to win its independence, at a cost of more than a million Algerian lives. Morocco gained independence from France and Spain with little bloodshed, but many Moroccans resent Western support for its authoritarian regime. Millions of North Africans and their offspring live in France and Belgium, where many seethe with anger at discrimination.

Despite their avowed civilizing mission, Europeans did little to cultivate a respect for law and individual human dignity abroad. When Algeria, Egypt, and other European colonies or protectorates finally became independent, many home-grown leaders proved despotic. Their tyrannies and self-aggrandizement often left their subjects destitute and ripe for religious messages to fill gaps in their own lives. Unhappy at home, many scapegoat the West.

Tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner? If we knew and understood everything, could—should—we then excuse and forgive everything? No. The mix of ostensible religious zeal and self-righteousness shown by many Islamic extremists fills a void. Many became jihadists after a life on drugs and/or a career in crime. Their degrading treatment of women and disdain for girls’ education are crimes against humanity. Their intolerance toward other religions and ways of life has no place in a globalized and interdependent world.

The international community cannot—should not—pardon criminal acts and must strive to punish and prevent them. If we are to create a better world, however, Westerners need to drop

their own self-righteousness. Let the French remember that their *Marseillaise* is itself a call to resist and destroy foreign invaders. “*Marchons!* Drench our fields with their tainted blood.”

Hubris and self-righteous conceit will not end hatred and despair. Nor will bombs and drone attacks on militants. To acknowledge past and present failings and begin to rectify them could do more for peace than *revanche*.