Behind the Omar Outrage: Suppressed History of 9/11

Trump’s demagogic ploy with the freshman lawmaker raises the more serious question of who and what led to the “Day of Planes,” writes Max Blumenthal.

By Max Blumenthal
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As Donald Trump sharpens his re-election messaging, he has sought to make a foil out of freshman Democrat Rep. Ilhan Omar, homing in on her identity as a black Muslim immigrant and her brazen defiance of what was once a bipartisan pro-Israel consensus. Trump’s most recent attack was the most inflammatory to date, implying through a characteristically dishonest Twitter video that Omar had played some role in the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Trump was referencing comments Omar made this month during a banquet of the Los Angeles chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR): “CAIR was founded after 9/11, because they recognized that some people did something and that all of us were starting to lose access to our civil liberties,” Omar said during a 20-minute-long denunciation of public bullying and violent attacks against Muslims living in the West. (CAIR was founded in 1994, contrary to Omar’s claim).

As innocuous as Omar’s comments might have seemed, they were easily spun by a right-wing bigot-sphere seeking to portray her as not merely insensitive to the deep wound Americans
suffered on 9/11, but as a possible terror-sympathizer. As Bernard Kerik, the disgraced former NYPD commissioner and convicted felon, said of Omar on Fox News, “she’s infatuated with Al Qaeda, with Hamas, with Hezbollah.”

For Trump, the manufactured outrage offered yet another opportunity to advance his rebranded version of the Southern Strategy, painting Omar as the face of a Democratic Party overrun by socialists, Muslims, MS13 and trans radicals – as a clear and present danger to the reactionary white exurbanites commonly referred to in mainstream media as “swing voters.”

Amid an onslaught of menacing condemnations and online death threats triggered by Trump’s tweet, prominent Democrats mobilized to defend Omar. However, many were too timid to mention her by name, apparently fearing that doing so would play into Trump’s cynical strategy. Some refused to defend her at all. And among those willing to speak up, most felt compelled to lead their defense by reinforcing the quasi-theological understanding of 9/11 that leaves anti-Muslim narratives unchallenged. “The memory of 9/11 is sacred ground, and any discussion of it must be done with reverence,” insisted House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

In Washington, 9/11 is understood as an act of inexplicable evil that materialized out of a clear blue sky. “They hate us because we’re free,” Americans are still told in a semi-official drone, conveniently excising the attacks that took place on 9/11 from their historical context. This ruthlessly enforced interpretation has had the effect of displacing blame from those who bear direct or indirect responsibility for the attacks onto much more convenient scapegoats like
the Islamic faith and its diverse mass of adherents.

In my new book, “The Management of Savagery,” I explain which people did what things to lay the groundwork for the worst terror attack on U.S. soil. Not all of those people were Muslim, and few have faced the kind of scrutiny Omar has for her seemingly benign comment about 9/11. As I illustrate, many of them maintained lustrous reputations well after the ash was cleared from Ground Zero. Today, some of their names – Zbigniew Brzezinski, Ronald Reagan, H.W. Bush – are prominently engraved on airports, federal offices, and library halls around the country. Others became the subject of rowdy bestsellers such as “Charlie Wilson’s War,” or saw their exploits dramatized in Cold War kitsch productions like “Rambo III.” And then there were those who waged America’s dirty wars from the shadows, and whose names will scarcely ever be known.

While these figures lay claim to the mantle of “national security,” their true legacy was the callous abandonment of that concept in order to advance imperial objectives. During the Cold War, they forged partnerships with theocratic monarchies and armed Islamist militants, even distributing jihadist textbooks to children in the name of defeating the Soviet scourge. Today, as Rep. Tulsi Gabbard – the lone foreign policy dissenter within the Democratic presidential field – pointed out, they are doing it all over again through their protection of the world’s largest Al Qaeda franchise in Syria’s Idlib province, which came into being thanks in large part to U.S. intervention in the country.

Honor Bob Parry’s legacy.
To effectively puncture Trump’s demagogic ploys, the discussion of 9/11 must move beyond a superficial defense of Omar and into an exploration of a critical history that has been suppressed. This history begins at least 20 years before the attacks occurred, when “some people did something.” Many of those people served at the highest levels of U.S. government, and the things they did led to the establishment of Al Qaeda as an international network — and ultimately, to 9/11 itself.

**Taliban ‘Unimportant’**

Back in 1979, some people initiated a multi-billion-dollar covert operation to trap the Red Army in Afghanistan and bleed the Soviet Union at its soft underbelly. They put heavy weapons in the hands of Islamist warlords such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, dispatched Salafi clerics such as “Blind Sheikh” Omar Abdel Rahman to the battlefield, and printed millions of dollars worth of textbooks for Afghan children that contained math equations encouraging them to commit acts of violent martyrdom against Soviet soldiers. They did anything they could to wreak havoc on the Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

These people were so hellbent on smashing the Soviet Union that they made common cause with the Islamist dictatorship of Pakistan’s Zia-ul-Haq and the House of Saud. With direct assistance from the intelligence services of these U.S. allies, Osama bin Laden, the scion of Saudi wealth, set up his Services Bureau on the Afghan border as a waystation for foreign Islamist fighters.
These people even channeled funding to bin Laden so he could build training camps along the Afghan-Pakistan border for the so-called freedom fighters of the mujahideen. And they kept watch over a ratline that shepherded young Muslim men from the West to the front lines of the Afghan proxy war, using them as cannon fodder for a cold-blooded, imperial operation marketed by the Wahhabi clergy in Saudi Arabia as a holy obligation.

These people were in the CIA, USAID, and the National Security Council. Others, with names like Charlie Wilson, Jesse Helms, Jack Murtha, and Joe Biden, held seats on both sides of the aisle in Congress.

When they finally got what they wanted, dislodging a secular government that had provided Afghan women with unprecedented access to education, their proxies plunged Afghanistan into a war of the warlords that saw half of Kabul turned to rubble, paving the way for the rise of the Taliban. And these people remained totally unrepentant about the monster they had created.

“Can you imagine what the world would be like today if there was still a Soviet Union?” remarked Zbigniew Bzezinski, the former NSC director who sold President Jimmy Carter on the Afghan proxy war. “So yes, compared to the Soviet Union, and to its collapse, the Taliban were unimportant.”

To some in Washington, the Taliban were a historical footnote. To others, they were allies of convenience. As a top State Department diplomat commented to journalist Ahmed Rashid in February 1997, “The Taliban will probably develop like Saudi Arabia. There be [the Saudi-owned oil company]
Aramco, pipelines, an emir, no parliament and lots of Sharia law. We can live with that.”

CIA Cover-ups and Blowback

Back in the U.S., some people fueled the blowback from the Afghan proxy war. The Blind Sheikh was given a special entry visa by the CIA as payback for the services he provided in Afghanistan, allowing him to take over the al-Kifah Center in New York City, which had functioned as the de facto U.S. arm of Al Qaeda’s Services Bureau. Under his watch and with help from bin Laden, some people and lots of aid were shuttled to the front lines of U.S. proxy wars in Bosnia and Chechnya while the Clinton administration generally looked the other way.

Though the Blind Sheikh was eventually convicted in a terror plot contrived by a paid informant for the FBI, some people in federal law enforcement had been reluctant to indict him. “There was a whole issue about [Abdel-Rahman] being given a visa to come into this country and what the circumstances were around that,” one of his defense lawyers, Abdeed Jabara told me. “The issue related to how much the government was involved with the jihadist enterprise when it suited their purposes in Afghanistan and whether or not they were afraid there would be exposure of that. Because there’s no question that the jihadists were using the Americans and the Americans were using the jihadists. There’s a symbiotic relationship.”

During the 1995 trial of members of the Blind Sheikh’s New York-based cell, another defense lawyer, Roger Stavis, referred to his clients before the jury as “Team America,”
emphasizing the role they had played as proxy fighters for the U.S. in Afghanistan. When Stavis attempted to summon to the witness stand a jihadist operative named Ali Abdelsauod Mohammed who had trained his clients in firearms and combat, some people ordered Mohammed to refuse his subpoena. Those people, according to journalist Peter Lance, were federal prosecutors Andrew McCarthy and Patrick Fitzgerald.

The government lawyers were apparently fretting that Mohammed would be exposed as an active asset of both the CIA and FBI, and as a former Army sergeant who had spirited training manuals out of Fort Bragg while stationed there during the 1980s. So Mohammed remained a free man, helping Al Qaeda plan attacks on American consular facilities in Tanzania and Kenya while the “Day of the Planes” plot began to take form.

In early 2000, some people gathered in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to prepare the most daring Al Qaeda operation to date. Two figures at the meeting, Saudi citizens named Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Midhar, were on their way to the United States. While in Kuala Lumpur, the duo’s hotel room was broken into by CIA agents, their passports were photographed, and their communications were recorded. And yet the pair of Al Qaeda operatives was able to travel together with multiple-entry visas on a direct flight from Kuala Lumpur to Los Angeles. That’s because for some reason, some people from the CIA failed to notify any people at the FBI about the terror summit that had just taken place. The “Day of Planes” plot was moving forward without a kink.

In Los Angeles, some people met Hazmi and Midhar at the airport, provided the two non-English speakers with a
personal caretaker and rented them apartments, where neighbors said they were routinely visited each night by unknown figures in expensive cars with darkened windows. Those people were Saudi Arabian intelligence agents named Omar Bayoumi and Khaled al-Thumairy.

Crawford, Texas

It was not until August 2001 that Midhar was placed on a terrorist watch list. That month, some people met at a ranch in Crawford, Texas, and reviewed a classified document headlined, “Bin Laden Determined to Strike Inside the US.” The bulletin was a page-and-a-half long, with detailed intelligence on the “Day of Planes” plot provided by Ali Mohammed, the Al Qaeda-FBI-CIA triple agent now registered as “John Doe” and disappeared somewhere in the federal prison system. Those people reviewed the document for a few minutes before their boss, President George W. Bush, moved on to other matters.

According to The Washington Post, Bush exhibited an “expansive mood” that day, taking in a round of golf. “We are going to be struck soon, many Americans are going to die, and it could be in the U.S.,” CIA counterterrorism chief Cofer Black warned days later. Bush did not meet with his cabinet heads again to discuss terrorism until Sept. 4.

A week later, on Sept. 11, some people did something.

They hijacked four civilian airliners and changed the course of American history with little more than box cutter blades in their hands. Fifteen of those 19 people, including Hazmi and Midhar, were citizens of Saudi Arabia. They were products of a Wahhabi school system and a politically
stultifying society that had thrived under the protection of a special relationship with the U.S. Indeed, the U.S. had showered theocratic allies like Saudi Arabia with aid and weapons while threatening secular Arab states that resisted its hegemony with sanctions and invasion. The Saudis were the favorite Muslims of America’s national security elite not because they were moderate, which they absolutely were not, but because they were useful.

In the days after 9/11, the FBI organized several flights to evacuate prominent Saudi families from the U.S., including relatives of Osama bin Laden. Meanwhile, Islamophobia erupted across the country, with even mainstream personalities such as TV news anchor Dan Rather taking to the airwaves to claim without evidence that Arab-Americans had celebrated the 9/11 attacks.

Unable to find a single operational Al Qaeda cell in the country, the FBI turned to an army of paid snitches to haul in mentally unstable Muslims, dupes and idlers like the Lackawanna 6 in manufactured plots. Desperate for a high-profile bust to reinforce the “war on terror” narrative, the bureau hounded Palestinian Muslim activists and persecuted prominent Islamic charities like the Holy Land Foundation, sending its directors to prison for decades for the crime of sending aid to NGOs in the occupied Gaza Strip.

As America’s national security state cracked down on Muslim civil society at home, it turned to fanatical Islamist proxies abroad to bring down secular and politically independent Arab states. In Libya, the U.S. and UK helped arm the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, a longtime affiliate of Al Qaeda, using it as a proxy to depose and murder
Muammar Gaddafi. As that country transformed from a stable, prosperous state into an Afghanistan-style playground for rival militias, including a chapter of the Islamic State, the Obama administration moved to do the same to Damascus.

In Syria, the CIA armed an outfit of supposedly “moderate rebels” called the Free Syrian Army that turned out to be nothing more than a political front and weapons farm for an array of extremist insurgent factions including Al Qaeda’s local affiliate and the Islamic State. The latter two groups were, of course, products of the sectarian chaos of Iraq, which had been ruled by a secular government until the U.S. came knocking after 9/11.

The blowback from Iraq, Libya and Syria arrived in the form of the worst refugee crises the world has experienced since World War II. And then came the bloodiest terror attack to hit the UK in history — in Manchester. There, the son of a Libyan Islamic Fighting Group member, who traveled to Libya and Syria on an MI6 ratline, slaughtered concert-goers with a nail bomb.

Cataclysmic social disruptions like these were like steroids for right-wing Islamophobes, electrifying Trump’s victorious 2016 presidential campaign, a wing of the Brexit “Leave” campaign in the UK, and far-right parties across Europe. But as I explain in “The Management of Savagery,” these terrifying trends were byproducts of decisions undertaken by national security elites more closely aligned with the political center — figures who today attempt to position themselves as leaders of the anti-Trump resistance.

Which people did which things to drag us into the political
nightmare we’re living through? For those willing to cut through the campaign season bluster, Ilhan Omar’s comments dare us to name names.

Max Blumenthal is an award-winning journalist and the author of books including best-selling “Republican Gomorrah,” “Goliath,” “The Fifty One Day War” and “The Management of Savagery,” published in March 2019 by Verso. He has also produced numerous print articles for an array of publications, many video reports and several documentaries including “Killing Gaza” and “Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie.” Blumenthal founded the Grayzone in 2015 to shine a journalistic light on America’s state of perpetual war and its dangerous domestic repercussions.

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