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# For Muslims in the Global South, American hostility began in 1979

if anyone wonders why America has backed off so far (and beyond) from responding to humanitarian catastrophes presented as security operations, against the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Rohingya in Myanmar, and the Palestinians in Gaza, then they do not understand the structure of the contemporary world, as it has grown up since 1979.

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For many in the Global South, the current world was forged not by the efforts of the Reagan administration which led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it was not born with the taking down of the Berlin Wall, the foggy end of Fukuyama's unipolar End of History or with the economic rise of China from the turn of the century. Instead, the year of change was 1979, during the Carter administration. And instead of Europe, its birth came in the Middle East with the toppling of the Shah's authoritarian, brutally enforced, police state. The Islamic Revolution's victory, no matter how you weigh its merits and humanitarian costs, established a viable alternative to the American package, whose main offering was alternatively pitched as liberal Democracy, civil liberties, and free trade.

The birth of the contemporary world for much of the world's non-white, non-Christian population, could not have emerged in a vacuum, it depended on a maternity ward provided by late state Cold War politics. The Islamic Revolution frightened the US into sending a US fleet into the Persian Gulf to protect its oil interests, the Soviets feared in this US move a flanking action by the West and moved to shore up a collapsing Marxist regime in Afghanistan just to the northeast of Iran, the Vietnamese, having just signed a Soviet-Vietnamese defence pact invaded the Cambodia ally of the Soviet rival and enemy of the new friend of the US, the People's Republic of China. China then invaded Vietnam. Western historians now predicted a massive land war between the Soviets and the PRC, the latter even backed perhaps by the US and NATO.

The West remembers the early childhood of the contemporary world again as a late phase of the Cold War, when Muslim freedom fighters (supported in Western movies by no less than the likes of Rambo and James Bond) fought with Western arms against the evil Soviets (now remembered as being just Russians for continuity of the opposite bench), Democracy finally won out over all the other systems (actually only Communism collapsed, and not everywhere), and America was the only superpower safeguarding the world

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regimes, backed by the US which protected them from Iran.

Ironically, Iran's biggest enemy at the time, with which it waged a long and

Officially, Iran's biggest enemy at the time, with which it waged a long and bloody war, Iraq, was only reinvented as the bastion of evil it is remembered as now, not because of torture, or Weapons of Mass Destruction (which it turns out were also an invention of the West), or authoritarianism, but because it had invaded one of the minor authoritarian states protected by America, Kuwait. Iraq was then invaded, defeated, and left as a ruined example to everyone of what would happen to a state that shook up not Democracy, but the secure American ring throughout the Muslim world around Iran.



February 5, 2003 – United States Secretary of State Colin Powell holding a model vial of anthrax while giving the presentation to the United Nations Security Council. [Wikipedia Commons](#)

During this period, everyday Muslims outside of the euro-dollar supported palaces of the Middle East were not in a new age of Democracy, economic plenty, or freedom. They lived under the heel of very well-armed, police states where they were the majority and in heavily surveilled and policed regions in countries where they were the minority. Unfortunately, some took up the

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a new life somewhere else (where they have been targeted as unwelcome outsiders now), forming political movements, or launching protests and civil

disobedience campaigns. The former groups unfortunately invited in from 2001 the Global War on Terror, others wound up leading the Arab Spring, many others continued to just exist in the conditions in which they were structurally trapped. America invaded Afghanistan, Iraq for second time, and sent smaller batches of military forces through the global south, including West Africa, to deal with what it pitched as the global Muslim threat.

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What has made the contemporary world, for so many in the Global South, particularly in the Muslim crescent, what it is today is that regardless of which option was taken to improve their conditions, from the most extreme to the most peaceful, they all suffered the same. War was declared in effect by the West at the urging of segments of the American political spectrum (importantly, America has always been a behemoth with multiple personalities in which the most aggressive usually wins out) not on extremists but on the Islamic world. This enemy was not the wealthy, gatekeeping, compradores of Western capital, but Islamic civilisation. Yes, the Russians, the PRC, and others have re-emerged as bad guys again, but these enemies will as far as possible be dealt with through negotiation, diplomacy, and the occasional proxy war (Ukraine). But if anyone wonders why America has backed off so far (and beyond) from responding to humanitarian catastrophes presented as security operations, against the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Rohingya in Myanmar, and the Palestinians in Gaza, then they do not understand the structure of the contemporary world, as it has grown up since 1979. And they do not understand that the populations in these areas continue to be effectively

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**Michael W. Charnev**

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Banner image: The Snake Charmer (*Le Charmeur de serpent*), an oil-on-canvas Orientalist painting by French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme produced around 1879. After it was used on the cover of Edward Said's book *Orientalism* in 1978, the work "attained a level of notoriety matched by few Orientalist paintings". [Wikipedia](#)

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### Posted by Michael Charney

A native of Flint, Michigan, Michael Charney is a full professor at SOAS, the University of London, in the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy (School of Interdisciplinary Studies) and the School of History, Religions, and Philosophies, where he teaches global security, strategic studies, and Asian military history. He received his PhD from the University of Michigan in 1999 on the subject of the history of the emergence of religious communalism in Rakhine and has published a number of books on military history in Southeast Asia and the political and intellectual history of Myanmar. He was a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Advanced Studies at the (National University of Singapore) where he researched religion and migration, was a project professor at the Institute for Advanced Studies of Asia at the University of Tokyo, and has spent most of the last two decades at SOAS, where he was elected to the Board of Trustees in 2016. He is a regular commentator in the media on events in Myanmar.

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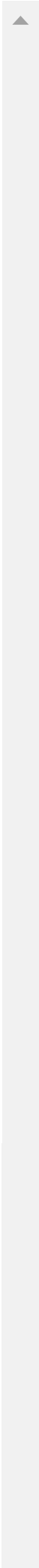


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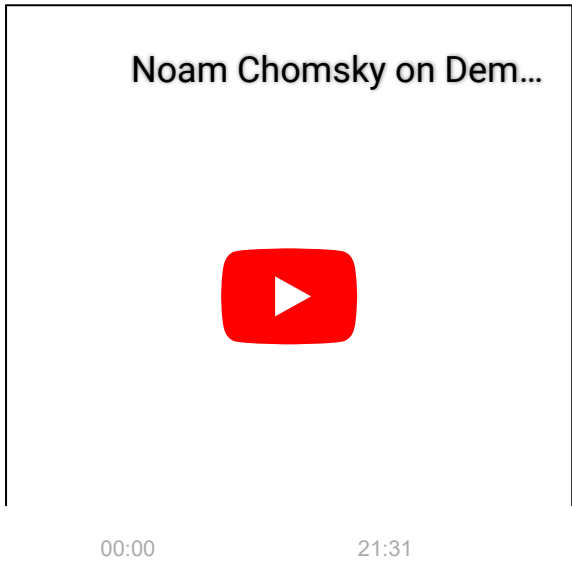


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