ISIS: The jihadist movement stamped “Made in America”

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The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is made up of forces variously estimated at between 3,000 and 10,000 fighters. It has taken over much of eastern Syria and northern and western Iraq, as well as the Trabil crossing on the Jordan–Iraq border. Its territory now extends to within 76 miles (122 kilometres) of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad.

The group has declared its intention of establishing a caliphate in the region, eliminating all the borders established in the Middle East by Britain and France after World War I along the lines of the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1915.

Last month, working with armed tribal leaders and former members of Saddam Hussein’s outlawed Baath Party, it captured the northern city of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, took control of its military and commercial resources, and continued expanding south along the Tigris River, taking the city of Tikrit.

Over the last two weeks, ISIS forces have expelled the Christian community from Mosul, which has been home to Christians for more than 1,600 years, demanding that they either convert, flee or face execution. Over 1,000 Christians have reportedly fled the city.

Crucially as far as the major powers are concerned, ISIS has captured much of the region’s strategic oil industry. It is also seizing large amounts of US weaponry abandoned in the country after the withdrawal from Iraq three years ago, including 1,500 Humvees, 4,000 PKC machineguns, and 52 M198 155-millimeter howitzers. This heavy artillery gives them the capability to bombard Iraqi cities, including potentially Baghdad, threatening Western commercial interests.

The fact remains, however, that the US, the major European powers, and their regional allies all previously lent financial, military and political support to ISIS and similar groups, which have “Made in the USA” stamped all over them. They have, until now, played a significant part in Washington’s efforts to overthrow the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, as part of a broader effort to gain control of the region’s vast energy resources and transit routes.

ISIS is distinguished by its religious fanaticism, commitment to capitalism, and virulent anti-communism. Like the Taliban in Afghanistan and similar groups in Somalia, Nigeria and elsewhere, it uses terror to put pressure on the imperialist powers and force them to make some accommodation with it as a regional power centre.

Such outfits have been able to garner some measure of support by exploiting the deeply rooted social discontent of broad layers of the population in the Middle East, largely as a result of the failure of the secular nationalist regimes and parties to improve the social and economic conditions or achieve any meaningful independence from imperialism.

ISIS is an offshoot of Al Qaeda, the terrorist Islamic group previously headed by Osama bin Laden, the son of the wealthy owner of a construction company with close links to the House of Saud. Al Qaeda was formed in the late 1980s in Afghanistan with support from the CIA, which backed the mujahedin as part of its covert war that began in 1979 against the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul.

Over a ten-year period, the US gave the mujahedin around $5 billion in weaponry and aid to recruit and train local forces. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan promoted the mujahedin, encouraging volunteers from the Arab and Islamic countries, such as bin Laden.

Al Qaeda was by no means the only Islamic fundamentalist group supported by Washington and its

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allies in a struggle for geopolitical influence against regimes and movements allied to Russia. Israel fostered Hamas, the offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, as a counterweight to Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organisation.

ISIS, formed in 2004, later incorporated a number of Sunni insurgent factions in Iraq. It was responsible for three terrorist bombings of hotels in Amman, Jordan in 2005, but remained a small group until the demonstrations that began in Dera'a in southern Syria in March 2011.

The Western powers, flush with success after organising an Islamist insurgency in Benghazi in order to justify NATO's overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, thought they could use similar forces to overthrow Assad in Syria, whose regime draws its main base of support from the Alawite sect, a Shi'a offshoot, and Sunni businessmen.

For three years, the US, along with the Gulf states and Turkey, poured billions into "opposition" groups, supposedly to unnamed "moderates," but in reality to Al Qaeda-linked Sunni groups such as al-Nusra and ISIS to spearhead a sectarian war. The US, Turkey and Jordan have operated a base in Jordan where US instructors trained dozens of ISIS members. In an article last year, the *New York Times* confirmed that the CIA assisted Arab governments and Turkey by airlifting weaponry to these groups in Jordan and Turkey. The *Guardian* reported last March that British and French instructors were also involved.

Other ISIS members were trained near Incirlik Air Base near Adana, Turkey, where US forces are based. After completing their training, they went to Syria and later Iraq. Following the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, the CIA used the US consulate in Benghazi as a transit base for weaponry, Islamist fighters and cash to Syria, until it was attacked on September 11, 2012 by Islamist militias in a "blowback" operation that killed the US ambassador and three consular staffers.

As opposition grew to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Shi'ite-dominated government, installed by Washington, which has launched a reign of terror against Iraq's minority Sunni population, the US and Saudi-sponsored civil war in Syria spilled over into Iraq.

ISIS's seemingly rapid advance must have been well prepared by its allies in the region, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Israel carries out constant surveillance of Syria from the Golan Heights, from where it has launched attacks on Syria, and provided intelligence information and a field hospital for the "rebels." Israeli figures, including former Israeli ambassador to Washington Michael Oren and Amos Gilad, director of the Defence Ministry's policy and political-military relations department, have spoken openly of Tel Aviv's working relations with the Saudis.

Shalom Yerushalmi, writing in the Israeli daily *Maariv* last March, claimed that Saudi Arabia was not just coordinating its intelligence efforts with Tel Aviv, but actually financing much of Israel's campaign against Iran, possibly as much a $1 billion, including its assassinations and development of computer viruses.

It is likely that Washington knew in advance of the ISIS offensive, given its stationing of Patriot missiles and the CIA's monitoring operations near the Turkish-Syrian border. It was widely reported last March that after the recapture of areas in western Syria by regime forces, ISIS and al-Nusra had withdrawn to their bases in the east, near the border with Iraq. But if the ISIS advance was unknown to the US, it means that its allies are working behind its back.

While Riyadh has now sought to distance itself from ISIS, outlawing the group, it is unlikely that it has stopped all funding. It is determined to ensure a Sunni buffer between itself and Iran and a government in Baghdad that is not beholden to Tehran, while working with Tel Aviv to ensure that Washington does not collaborate with Iran to suppress the Sunni insurgency.

Washington is now riven with dissent as to how to proceed. In Syria, it is backing the very forces it opposes in Iraq. Meanwhile, it has sent forces to protect its embassy and 5,000 staff and subcontractors in Baghdad, and is preparing the ground for new military ventures, using the threat from ISIS as a pretext.

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