

# American imperialism and the rise of Islamic extremism in Syria and Iraq

Niles Williamson  
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Just one year after the Obama administration backed off on plans to bomb Syria in the face of popular opposition in the United States and the UK, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has conveniently emerged as the new pretext for launching an open imperialist assault in the Middle East.

US President Barack Obama is set to announce Wednesday, in a nationally-televised address, an unending war supposedly directed at ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. The administration has already launched airstrikes in Iraq, accompanied by the reintroduction of troops into the country. This is to be massively expanded.

Last year, the *casus belli* for war against Syria was the alleged chemical weapons attack on Ghouta. Claims by the imperialist powers that responsibility for these attacks lay with the Assad government were later exposed to be a calculated fraud, including by journalist Seymour Hersh in a report that was subsequently buried by the US media.

While the ostensible target of the expanded war drive in the Middle East is now ISIS, behind the scenes the American ruling class is seeking to utilize the crisis surrounding ISIS to rejuvenate the “war on terror” and prepare action against the Assad government—to finish what it started. Assad has traditionally been a close ally of both Iran and Russia, the latter a target of an escalating war drive set off by the right-wing US and German backed coup in Ukraine.

That the US is still plotting against Assad can be seen in numerous articles produced by think-tanks and foreign policy magazines. One that appeared in the most recent issue of *Foreign Affairs* (An Army to Defeat Assad) is penned by former CIA analyst and leading Democratic Party strategist Kenneth M. Pollack, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. Pollack calls for the United States to massively arm and train the current opposition forces in Syria creating an army that could defeat ISIS and topple the Assad regime, establishing a pro-US military dictatorship.

Within this context, the brutal beheadings of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff by ISIS are, at the very least, well timed pretexts for US imperialism.

## ISIS and the campaign against Syria

ISIS is not, as the American government and mainstream media insist, an inexplicable “evil” force or a “cancer.” The success of ISIS and other Islamic extremist groups in Syria and Iraq is very much a product of American foreign policy in the Middle East.

The relationship of the American government to ISIS follows a traditional pattern, including its relationship to Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden. Like Al Qaeda, ISIS is a product of US intervention—the former in Afghanistan as part of the proxy war with the Soviet Union in the 1980s, and the latter in Syria and Iraq. In its efforts to assert control over the Middle East and Central Asia, the American ruling class has invariably relied on the most backward, reactionary elements. (See, ISIS atrocities and US imperialism)

The US, the major European powers, and their regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have all lent substantial military, political and financial support to anti-Assad groups in Syria, much to the benefit of ISIS and other extremist outfits.

Under both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, the American government funneled money to Syrian opposition forces as a part of a general policy aimed at the overthrow of the Assad regime. One significant outcome of the strategy for destabilizing Syria has been the growth of Sunni extremist organizations such as ISIS.

US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks revealed that between 2006 and 2010, the State Department provided \$6 million to an Islamic group, the Movement for Justice and Development (MJD) set up by Syrian exiles in London. The money was used by the MJD to fund their satellite news operation, Barada TV, as well as activities inside Syria.

A diplomatic cable from December of 2006 laid out the State Department’s plans for antagonizing the Assad regime and destabilizing Syria that included promoting former Syrian Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam and his National Salvation Front.

With the onset of hostilities in Syria in 2011, the CIA began a major gunrunning and military training operation under the guise of providing non-lethal aid to the so-called moderates in the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

The covert CIA operation involved Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey purchasing weapons which have then been funneled across the Turkish border into northern Syria and distributed by intermediaries including the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Weapons caches are known to have been smuggled into Syria from Libya, Croatia, and Sudan.

This intervention of the CIA has flooded Syria with automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and millions of rounds of ammunition, as well as antitank and antiaircraft missiles.

According to C.J. Chivers, reporting for the *New York Times*, hundreds of military cargo flights from Saudi Arabia and Qatar to Jordan and Turkey delivered at least 3,500 tons of military equipment into Syria between November 2012 and March 2013, through distribution networks set up and overseen by the CIA.

Seymour Hersh, in an April 2014 *London Review of* detailed the operation of the “rat line” set up by the CIA to transport fighters and weapons from Libya into Syria.

According to Hersh, the operation was overseen by then CIA Director David Petraeus, and the Benghazi consulate, which came under attack on September 11, 2012, was being used to provide cover for the transit of weaponry.

Funding for the CIA operation, according to Hersh, was officially overseen by the British intelligence agents from MI6. Retired US soldiers were hired by front companies to procure and transport the weapons to Syria. The CIA shut down the operation after the Benghazi consulate attack, but arms and fighters continued to flow into Syria.

While supposedly intended for the rebels in the FSA, a significant number of these weapons ended up in the hands of ISIS and other Islamic fundamentalist groups, including the Al Nusra Front, the Syrian affiliate of Al-Qaeda.

According to David Sanger, writing in the *New York Times*, American officials and Middle Eastern diplomats knew that most of the arms being smuggled into Syria throughout 2012 had ended up in the hands of “hard-line Islamic jihadists.” Nevertheless, the program to flood weapons into Syria and train rebel fighters continued.

A large cache of weapons from Croatia smuggled into Syria through Jordan in February 2013 ultimately ended up in the hands of ISIS fighters and other groups including Ahrar al-Sham. ISIS fighters deployed a Croatian M79 Osa anti-tank weapon against the Iraqi army during their campaign in Anbar province. ISIS fighters have also been photographed fighting in Iraq with a Croatian RBG-6 grenade launcher.

Just across the Syrian border in Jordan and Turkey, the CIA and US military have also been involved providing military training to hundreds of Syrian rebels. In an article last year, the *New York Times* reported that a 50-man cell trained by the CIA in Jordan was dispatched to Syria in September 2013.

The attempt by American imperialism to draw a hard line between the FSA, which it openly backs, and groups like ISIS, is a political fraud.

During the course of the Syrian conflict, thousands of fighters have defected from the FSA to al-Nusra, with entire brigades pledging their allegiance to the al-Qaeda affiliate. Al-Nusra units and FSA brigades have regularly launched joint attacks against Assad’s forces.

At the end of last year a commander of the Supreme Military Council of Free Syrian Army’s eastern front, Saddam al-Jamal, pledged his allegiance to ISIS. Earlier this year, Al-Nusra and ISIS fought together in a failed attempt to defend the city of Yabroud from an attack by the Syrian military.

### **Baghdadi and Shishani’s US connections**

As with Al Qaeda, many of those involved in the organization have a shadowy past, including connections to the United States and its major allies.

Multiple media reports about Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the current leader of ISIS, who ascended to the leadership in 2010, have revealed that he has previously been in contact with US authorities.

This episode of Baghdadi’s history has been largely downplayed in

the *BBC* and *streamline media*, which prefers to present Baghdadi as a sinister figure with an unremarkable past. It is likely that Baghdadi’s time in prison played a key role in his rapid rise to the head of the organization.

According to the Defense Department, Baghdadi was arrested by the US military in February 2004 and held as a civilian detainee at the notorious Camp Bucca until December 2004 when he was given an unconditional release. However, the former commander of Camp Bucca, Colonel Kenneth King told *The Daily Beast* that Baghdadi was not released from US custody until 2009.

Baghdadi was named the head of the predecessor group of ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq, in May 2010, not long after the previous leaders of the organization, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri, were killed in a joint military raid by American and Iraqi forces near Tikrit.

Another figure with previous ties to the US and its allies is Tarkhan Batirashvili, otherwise known as Abu Omar al-Shishani, an ethnic Chechen from Georgia who became the ISIS commander of the northern sector of Syria in the summer of 2013.

According to Gordon Hahn of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in an interview with NPR on Friday, Shishani “joined the Georgian Army and became an expert in various weaponry and was trained under the US train and equip program to prepare Georgian military for counterinsurgency operations and counterterrorist tactics.”

After leaving the Georgian army, Shishani was arrested for illegally storing weapons, spent three years in prison, then travelled to Turkey to join an Islamic fundamentalist group fighting in Syria.

The involvement of US intelligence agencies with Chechen nationalist and Islamist organizations is longstanding. Hahn notes that “many... people in Washington...tend to downplay or deny the jihadi [Islamic fundamentalist] nature of the Caucasus Emirate,” a separatist organization in Chechnya. “There’s a certain element within Washington that seeks to portray the Chechen cause and the Caucasus Emirate as more moderate than it really is in the hope that someday, perhaps, the United States would be supporting them against Russia.”

It is worth recalling that Tamerlan Tsarnaev, one of the suspects in the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, was an ethnic Chechen who also had ties to US intelligence agencies. Tsarnaev’s mother and defense lawyers allege that the FBI sought to recruit Tsarnaev in order to use him as part of anti-Russian operations in Chechnya led by Islamist forces.

Whatever the specific ties between the US and leaders of ISIS, responsibility for the rise of the organization and its subsequent crimes lay squarely at the feet of American and European imperialism. In their drive to overthrow Assad, the imperialist powers have actively worked to destabilize Syria by providing weapons, money, and training to the benefit of Sunni fundamentalist elements, creating in the process a convenient pretext for the further escalation of military interventions in the region.



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