The US arming of ISIS

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Ministers from 20 countries assembled in Paris June 2 in what was billed as a meeting of the coalition to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This alliance, cobbled together by Washington, consists largely of NATO allies together with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf oil monarchies.

Notably absent from the proceedings were three countries that have been heavily involved in the fight against ISIS: Syria, Iran and Russia. This was by US design.

At the outset of the Paris meeting, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi accused the world of having "failed" Iraq, calling attention to the recent advances of ISIS in both Iraq and Syria as well as the uninterrupted flow of Islamist foreign fighters into both countries.

For his part, US Deputy Under Secretary of State Anthony Blinken insisted that Washington and its allies are pursuing a "winning strategy," and that it would succeed "if we remain united, determined and focused."

Over the past several weeks, this "winning strategy" has seen ISIS capture Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's Anbar province, as well as the historic city of Palmyra in Syria. In the past few days, ISIS forces have advanced into Aleppo province in Syria, overrunning rival Islamist militias and Syrian government troops as well. This offensive has proceeded without any interference from US and allied warplanes supposedly waging an air war against ISIS.

"Focused" is scarcely a word that any objective observer would use to describe US policy in the region. While claiming to be committed to a war against ISIS, Washington and its regional allies have time and again proven themselves to be its principal sources of strength.

This movement did not exist until the US launched its criminal war of aggression against Iraq in 2003, killing hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and stoking sectarian

tensions as part of a strategy of divide-and-conquer that deliberately pitted Shiites and Sunnis against each other.

It grew stronger based on the US-NATO war for regime change in Libya, which utilized Al Qaeda-linked militias—now affiliated with ISIS—as ground troops in overthrowing and murdering Muammar Gaddafi and plunging the country into a state of chaos that continues to this day. It was further strengthened by the US-backed war for regime change in Syria, in which ISIS emerged as the most powerful faction in the bloody sectarian war to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad.

The latest ISIS offensive has been made possible by a massive infusion of US weapons. Prime Minister Abadi admitted Monday that the Islamists captured some 2,300 armored Humvees—worth over one billion dollars—when it routed Iraqi security forces in Mosul nearly a year ago.

In a Reuters column Tuesday, Peter Van Buren, a former US State Department official in Iraq, reported that, in addition, at least 40 M1A2 main battle tanks as well as vast quantities of "small arms and ammunition, including 74,000 machine guns, and as many as 52 M198 howitzer moil gun systems" fell into the hands of the Islamist militia.

There is an inherent logic in the flow of US arms to ISIS, which, while officially branded as America's most dangerous terrorist threat, is at the same time the most powerful military opponent of the Assad government in Syria.

It would not be the first time that American weapons were funneled to an ostensible enemy in order to further the counterrevolutionary aims of US imperialism. Thirty years ago, a similar scenario played out in what became known as the Iran-Contra affair, with a secret network in the White House organizing the sale of arms to Iran—then labeled by Washington as

a terrorist nation—to fight against Iraq and, most crucially, to obtain money to secretly and illegally finance and arm the so-called contras in a CIA-orchestrated terrorist war against Nicaragua.

Whether or not similar behind-the-scenes machinations underlie the massive rearmament of ISIS, it would appear that different factions within the US government and its gargantuan military and intelligence apparatus are waging different wars in Iraq and Syria.

For a sizable faction within the US ruling establishment, the overthrow of Assad and with it the isolation, weakening and ultimate destruction of the governments of both Iran and Russia remain the overriding strategic aims. In the absence of the so-called moderate rebels that US imperialism and its pseudo-left apologists have tirelessly attempted to conjure up, they are prepared to utilize ISIS, the Al Nusra Front and similar Al Qaeda-linked elements to further these ends.

These strategic aims far outweigh any concern over terrorism, which they believe has its own uses as a means of terrorizing the American people into accepting war and police state measures.

This orientation likewise has a long history, going back to the US backing of Islamist elements in Afghanistan with the aim of giving the Soviet Union what was then described as its "own Vietnam." That venture produced the Al Qaeda movement, which is officially blamed for the attacks of 9/11.

On the superficial level of media analysis, it becomes increasingly difficult to make any sense of American foreign policy. The apparent pursuit of inherently contradictory policies is bound up with the unavoidable difficulties that arise from attempting to exert control over the entire planet. Inevitably, this quest produces one catastrophe after another, from Afghanistan, to Iraq, to Libya, Syria and beyond.

Behind the apparent incoherence of American policy lie objectives that, at their deepest level, are wholly irrational. That is, the attempt to prop up by military means a position of global political hegemony that is already in advanced and irretrievable decline.

The bid by Washington to overcome by means of armed violence powerful objective tendencies rooted in the historic crisis of US and world capitalism yields a succession of utterly reckless and destructive interventions that together drive inexorably toward a

Third World War.