

ANALYSIS

Geopolitics: Obama's new war in Iraq and the region

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Ashley Smith analyzes the complex conflicts driving the crisis in the Middle East—and fueling the drive for an intensified U.S. intervention in Iraq, and possibly Syria.

THE ISLAMIC State in Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) horrifying execution of American photojournalist James Foley has given the Obama administration cover to intensify its military intervention in Iraq, and possibly Syria.

Obama cloaks his new war in the mantle of humanitarianism to defend ISIS victims like Iraq's Yazidis and Christians. And now he is doing his best to channel George Bush's rhetoric about a civilizational holy war in the wake of Foley's murder:

No just god would stand for what they did yesterday and what they do every single day. They may claim out of expediency that they are at war with the United States or the West, but the fact is they terrorize their neighbors and offer them nothing but an endless slavery to their empty vision and the collapse of any definition of civilized behavior.

No one should doubt the barbarism of ISIS's violence against its enemies—but Obama's pretensions of humanitarianism and countering terror are cynical posturing to win support for U.S. warmongering. Such posturing is contradicted by actual U.S. policy—at the same time he claims to defend Iraqis against ISIS, he is backing Israel's state terrorism against Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

Rhetoric aside, Obama has a clear imperial agenda. He aims to contain and crush ISIS, prevent the break-up of Iraq, stabilize the Middle East and ensure the uninterrupted flow of oil. To achieve these goals, he has sent hundreds of military advisers, mobilized aircraft carriers and launched a wave of air strikes against ISIS in Iraq—and he is considering doing the same in Syria. He is now the fourth president in a row to wage war in Iraq.

The stakes for the U.S. are high. ISIS threatens the entire state system that European and American imperialism have overseen since the carve-up of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. ISIS aims to establish a Sunni caliphate, first in Syria and Iraq, and then throughout the rest of the region. Right now, it controls about a third of Syria and as much as a quarter of Iraq.

ISIS has established itself as a new state power in this territory. It possesses a military force that initially totaled about 12,000 fighters, and after its conquest of Iraq, it has added thousands of new recruits for a total force of as many as 50,000.

It has established governmental structures, including a court system that enforces its reactionary interpretation of Sharia law. And it now controls and taxes the economy of its territory. It sells oil on the black market to generate revenues. It is thus a formidable capitalist state in the making, and has

designs of regional conquest.

CONTRARY TO various conspiracy theories on the so-called anti-imperialist Left, the U.S. did not back or fund ISIS in Syria against the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad. ISIS is an unintended, bastard child of U.S. imperial policy.

The U.S. has long cultivated an alliance with Saudi Arabia as one of its key regional allies besides Israel. It used the Saudi state as well as Pakistan to combat secular nationalism and Communism. This helped to spread the Wahabist ideology and even its more extreme Sunni Salafist offshoots—the very forces that Obama now condemns for standing for things “no just god would.”

Thus, Democratic President Jimmy Carter and Republican Ronald Reagan both collaborated with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to back the fundamentalist Mujahideen during the popular uprising against the USSR invasion and occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. One of the so-called Afghan Arabs who participated in this insurgency was none other than Osama bin Laden. He built al-Qaeda out of veterans of the resistance against the USSR.

Soon bin Laden turned al-Qaeda against the U.S., finally launching an attack on September 11 against the World Trade Center and Pentagon. That tragedy was “blowback”—the CIA’s term for the unintended consequences of a covert operation suffered by the civilian population of the aggressor government.

September 11 gave George Bush Jr.’s the alibi to launch his imperial plan for a “New American Century.” Bush wanted to project American power in Central Asia and the Middle East; establish military bases; replace regimes in Iraq, Iran and Syria with new clients; and thereby lock in American control of the region’s oil. This would ensure U.S. domination over all potential rivals that depend on that oil, China in particular.

Of course, Bush justified these imperial ambitions with a set of lies. He claimed Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), was a threat to the U.S., and collaborated with al-Qaeda. In reality, Iraq had no WMDs, it was in a state of collapse in the aftermath of the first Gulf War and a decade of stringent sanctions, and it had no relationship with the terrorist network.

In fact, Bush’s occupation brought al-Qaeda to Iraq. The Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had served with bin Laden in Afghanistan, founded al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004. This became the foundation for ISIS—which today, having declared a new caliphate to rule over a large territory in both Iraq and Syria, calls itself simply Islamic State.

Bush’s occupation of Iraq provided the predecessor organizations of ISIS with a stream of Sunni recruits. Iraq’s three great communities—Sunnis, Shia and Kurds—were happy to see Saddam toppled. But the Sunni and Shia elite and masses quickly built separate resistances against the American occupation.

Among the Sunni population, the jihadists developed into a counterrevolutionary force that targeted not only U.S. forces, but also the Shia and their holy sites. They drew on Sunni resentments that the Shia had supplanted them as the new rulers of Iraq. Bush took advantage of this extreme sectarianism to divide and conquer the fractured resistances.

To protect themselves against such attacks, the Shia elites established militias to defend their population. The U.S. then encouraged these Shia militias to join the security forces. Soon, the U.S. and the Shia-dominated state had turned the security forces not only against the extremist groups carrying out assaults on Shia, but also against the Sunni resistance and population as a whole.

This divide-and-rule strategy detonated a civil war that raged from 2006 to 2008. The fighting killed tens of thousands, drove 4 million people from their homes and ethnically cleansed whole sections of Baghdad. The Sunni tribal leaders finally called off the fighting, set up the so-called Awakening Councils, and turned on the jihadists, driving them underground.

During his so-called surge of troops into Iraq, Bush put the Awakening Councils on the American payroll. He and his successor Barack Obama promised to convince Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to integrate them into the new Iraqi Army. But Maliki, supported by the Shia elite, refused, as he set about consolidating a Shia-dominated state.

THE IRAQI resistance and civil war paralyzed the U.S., causing its relative decline in the region. Ironically, the real victor of the Iraq War was Iran. It now had a new ally in Iraq's Shia-dominated state to add to an emergent network that included Assad in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon and, for a time, Hamas in Gaza.

To contain Iran's rise, both Bush and Obama turned to America's historic Sunni allies, particularly the regime in Saudi Arabia, to create a bulwark against the so-called "Shia Crescent," dominated by Iran. Israel, of course, was eager to target Iran as well. This unholy alliance used Iran's civilian nuclear power program as an alibi to impose ever more extreme sanctions.

Iran, in turn, sought imperial backers and alliances to bolster its position. It found supporters in Russia and China, and lesser powers such as Venezuela. The Iranian establishment was eager to take advantage of America's difficulties to assert its own aims in the region and world.

Bush and Obama's efforts to challenge the "Shia Crescent" by bolstering Sunni forces generalized sectarianism throughout the region. Washington's Sunni allies, especially right-wing clerics and devout capitalists, took the cue and sponsored Salafist groups, in Iraq and many other countries. The region was becoming a sectarian tinderbox, and ISIS was plotting to set it aflame.

ISIS re-emerged as part of the counter-revolution against the Arab Spring.

In early 2011, the revolutionary wave began with hope and unity throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Workers, students and peasants rose up against the autocracies in each country. The "Arab Spring" was characterized by efforts to overcome sectarian and ethnic divisions to forge a united fight for democracy, equality, and redistribution of wealth.

Initially, the Obama administration supported the old order. But under the pressure of events, it opted to sacrifice old friends like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak to preserve the core of the capitalist states over which they had presided. The U.S. cynically co-opted the revolutionary upheaval in Libya, choosing to get rid of its sometime ally, sometime opponent, Muammar el-Qaddafi, in the hopes of creating a more reliable regime.

Once its core allies were threatened, however, the U.S. backed a savage counterrevolution to drown the Arab Spring in blood. Obama turned a blind eye to Saudi Arabia's invasion to defend Bahrain's Sunni regime and smash the predominantly Shia rebellion, with untold numbers killed, tortured and arrested. Soon, Shia mosques were being leveled in Bahrain.

Like the U.S., Russia and China backed the counterrevolution. They supported Bashar al-Assad's repression of the pro-democracy uprising in Syria. While Obama claimed to support the Syrian rebels, he did nothing to help them. He hoped for a "Yemeni solution," modeled on the arrangement that got rid of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, but retained the regime he headed—in Syria, Assad would go, but the core of his state would continue to rule.

Assad took advantage of Obama's hesitation to launch his own divide-and-conquer strategy. He released 1,000 Salafists from Syrian jails, knowing they would attack the Alawite (a branch of Shia Islam) and Christian minorities. Assad postured as the protector of these populations against Salafist terrorism.

ISIS played exactly the role of a fifth column for Assad inside liberated territory. It regrouped its scattered forces from Iraq inside al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, the Al Nusra Front, but soon split to form ISIS in 2013. Unlike Al Nusra, which, while reactionary, actually fought Assad's regime, ISIS did not. It waged war on the anti-regime revolutionaries and their mass supporters.

The Assad regime and ISIS have thus been de facto collaborators in counter-revolution, while all the while claiming to be mortal enemies. Even as ISIS gobbled up whole regions of Syria, Assad has up until recently not attacked it, but instead focused on bombing Syrian revolutionaries and their supporters. In exchange, ISIS, which has seized control of much of the country's oil industry, sold crude oil to the regime.

America's Sunni allies intensified this sectarian counter-revolutionary dynamic in Syria. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Kuwait supported the various moderate Islamist forces against Assad, though not ISIS. However, Salafist clerics and the devout bourgeoisie, especially in Saudi Arabia, supported ISIS with money and recruits.

At this point however, ISIS is a self-supporting emerging state with its own sources of revenues, derived from taxes, ransom for hostages and the sale of oil on the black market, which by some estimates nets as much as \$3 million a day—and that's not to mention what it has seized during its more recent offensive in Iraq, especially weapons and military equipment.

WITH ITS base established in Syria, ISIS plotted the expansion and establishment of its caliphate in Iraq. It postured as a force that would stand up for Sunnis against Maliki's increasingly sectarian Shia state.

After U.S. forces left at the end of 2011, Maliki used his Dawa Party to consolidate a Shia dictatorship against both Sunnis and Kurds. He purged the Sunni elite from key positions in the state and cut off the flow of state funds to Sunni cities. Similarly, he confronted the Kurdish Regional Government over its oil sales to Turkey.

The Sunni rose up against the Maliki regime in what some called the "Iraqi Spring" in 2013. Amid this wave of protest, ISIS struck a tense alliance with former Baathists organized in the Naqshbandi Order and a section of the tribal leadership. Maliki sent the mostly Shia Iraqi Army to attack protests, arrest thousands and torture those they abducted in jails like Abu Ghraib.

ISIS forces took advantage of this repression to pose as fighters against the Shia state. They took control of Falluja and Ramadi in December 2013 and then seized Mosul and other areas, starting in June. ISIS expropriated nearly \$500 million from banks in Mosul, captured a vast stockpile of U.S.-made weaponry from the collapsing Iraqi Army and took control of oil wells and refineries near the city.

ISIS then advanced throughout western Iraq, reaching as far as the country's borders with Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Today, ISIS rules over an area of Iraq and Syria that is about the size of Great Britain, with at least 6 million inhabitants.

The Kurds reacted by seizing the contested city of Kirkuk, with its strategic oilfields. This established a border with ISIS territory. Meanwhile, the Maliki regime called up 40,000 volunteers from Shia militias to bolster the collapsing Iraqi Army. That mobilization likely persuaded ISIS not to

attack Baghdad. Instead, ISIS has focused on attacking Kurdish-controlled territory, scoring significant victories against the Kurdish Peshmerga militia.

Iraq thus stands on the verge of a three-cornered civil war that could tear the country apart—with the metastasizing conflict threatening to engulf the entire region.

Iraq and Syria can no longer be said to operate as unitary states. ISIS has its sights set on regime change in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon. On top of that, the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq has flirted with the idea of declaring independence, something that could inspire Kurds to rise up in Syria, Iran and Turkey.

THE U.S. is desperate to defend the existing state system by any means necessary. But it is no longer the unchallenged superpower it once was.

As a result of its defeat in Iraq, the economic crisis of the past several years and political paralysis, the U.S. is in relative decline internationally—against imperial competitors like China, as well as in the Middle East itself. Obama is therefore reluctant to launch what would be a profoundly unpopular and risky ground invasion of Iraq.

Instead, the U.S. is working on a strategy that combines forcing political reconciliation in Iraq, carrying out aerial bombardment of ISIS positions, increasing support for the Peshmerga and Iraqi Army as surrogate ground forces, and compelling all the states in the region to see ISIS as their principal enemy.

The U.S. attempt at winning political reconciliation among Shia, Kurdish and Sunni elites in Iraq scored an advance when Maliki was forced to step down in favor of Haider al-Abadi. But this may end up being a pyrrhic victory. While celebrated as a conciliator, Abadi was, in fact, Maliki's right-hand man in the Dawa Party and in the consolidation of the Shia state.

Dawa and the rest of the Shia establishment will not agree to demands Sunni leaders will make as a condition for returning to collaboration with the central government. As *The New York Times* reports:

"Sunni politicians pushed demands that they considered necessary, but had little chance of being accepted. They included a halt to government shelling and air strikes on Sunni areas where ISIS is present; the withdrawal of Shiite militias from predominantly Sunni cities; the release of Sunni detainees who have not been convicted of crimes; the dismissal of criminal charges against a number of Sunni politicians, which they call political motivated; and the cancellation of the law banning former members of Saddam Hussein's regime from holding government posts."

Moreover, the Shia-dominated state's confrontation with the Kurds in the north looks very difficult to resolve.

The Kurds are determined to sell their own oil separately, something that Dawa has opposed. And the Kurds may use American military support to further consolidate their hold on their section of the country. The more they do so, the less interested they will be in political reconciliation.

The American ace in the hole is perhaps ISIS itself. At the moment, the Sunni population sees ISIS a lesser evil compared to the Shia state. Most Sunnis don't support the ISIS caliphate or its ideology. As ISIS imposes its reactionary ideology and practices on the Sunni population, it could squander the passive support it enjoys right now. Already, ISIS has massacred Sunnis who oppose its agenda.

The U.S. hopes to take advantage of potential Sunni opposition to ISIS—as it did back in 2008, when

Washington got the tribal leadership's Awakening Councils to turn on the Salafists and align with the U.S.

But the Sunni establishment would be right to be suspicious—Maliki's Dawa Party blocked the incorporation of the Councils into the Shia state, and it remains in charge today, though under different leadership. In reality, the division between the Sunni elites and the Shia state is far deeper now than ever before.

THE U.S. military strategy is to conduct an air war against ISIS in Iraq and strengthen the Peshmerga and Iraqi Army as surrogate ground forces. Already, the U.S. has conducted more than 90 bombing runs, mainly to help the Peshmerga and Iraqi Army retake a strategic dam near Mosul that supplies the bulk of water to the country.

But if the U.S. wants to defeat ISIS, it will have to expand its war into Syria. This presents the Obama administration with a thorny problem, however. On paper, the U.S. stands for regime change in Syria and supports the moderate resistance against Assad. If the U.S. takes the fight against ISIS into Syria, it will mean collaborating in some way, shape or form with Assad, even if unspoken.

Assad knows this, too. He is thus trying to corner Obama into cooperating with him. The Assad regime has for the first time really started to attack ISIS forces in Syria. Seeing this, some in the American establishment—including the former ambassador to Iraq under George Bush—now advocate an alliance of convenience with Assad.

Obama has so far rejected this, stopping at authorizing air surveillance of ISIS in Syria. At the same time, he has secured \$500 million in funding for what the U.S. calls the moderate opposition to the regime. Assad has responded that any such surveillance and bombing would be looked upon as a declaration of war—in the hopes of pressuring Obama into an alliance against ISIS.

As *Independent* journalist Patrick Cockburn reports:

"The U.S. has already covertly assisted the Assad government by passing on intelligence about the exact location of jihadi leaders through the BND, the German intelligence service...This may explain why Syrian aircraft and artillery have been able to on occasion been able to target accurately rebel commanders and headquarters."

Obama has ruled out any escalation in Iraq from an air war to a ground invasion. But it remains to be seen if the Peshmerga and Iraqi Army will be sufficient to defeat ISIS. It is also unclear whether Assad has the capacity to defeat ISIS, which just scored a major victory in Syria by seizing the Tabqa Airport, along with several fighter jets. Thus, however much Obama rules it out, there are strong pressures toward mission creep.

The U.S. hopes to unite all regional powers against ISIS. But it must find a way to overcome or neutralize the very sectarian conflicts, extending across borders, that it enflamed. To defeat ISIS, Washington needs help now from governments and regimes on both sides of the sectarian divide—but any deal with states on either side would likely antagonize the other.

The U.S. needs Iran to help it bolster the Iraqi regime. It may even be compelled to collaborate with Assad against ISIS in Syria. But such collaboration poses the danger of confirming ISIS's contention that the U.S. is at war with the Sunni population. Any such rapprochement with Iran and Syria would infuriate America's Sunni allies, especially Saudi Arabia—not to mention Israel.

Thus, it is hard to see how the U.S. will be able to forge a common front against ISIS. For example, Israel launched its air strike in Gaza to disrupt the unity deal between Hamas and the Palestinian

Authority, wreck the so-called “peace process,” and attempt to crush Hamas. Israel will also do everything in its power to disrupt rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran, which Israel deems its mortal enemy.

Similarly intractable conflicts are obvious between the chief Sunni sectarian state, Saudi Arabia, and its Shia opponent, Iran. The U.S. will therefore be hard-pressed to curtail the myriad sectarian state conflicts and proxy hostilities it enflamed.

THE SITUATION in the Middle East today is complicated. But the left must be absolutely clear on a series of propositions.

The first is that the U.S. is the principal cause of this metastasizing crisis. It has no solution to it. It hopes support for counter-revolutionary states will ensure its control over the flow of oil that fuels the world capitalist system. We must therefore oppose any and all U.S. intervention in the region—whether unilaterally or multilaterally through the United Nations, and whatever the “humanitarian” justifications it gives for its wars.

Second, the tendency of some sections to the left to support rival imperialisms to the U.S. as the best way to oppose the “main enemy” is a disaster. This will discredit the left in the eyes of the masses in the region and here at home. Russia and China are just as counter-revolutionary as the U.S. in the Middle East—most obviously, they have backed the murderous Assad regime in Syria in its war on a pro-democracy uprising.

Third, we should also oppose intervention by any of the other states of the region, from Iran to Saudi Arabia. These capitalist states have their own imperialist ambitions and are all part of defending the counter-revolutionary order.

By opposing intervention, we can provide space for the genuine forces for liberation that we saw emerge in the Arab Spring to regroup and build so they can provide an alternative to sectarian religious forces. Undoubtedly, the masses will rise again, because the counter-revolution offers nothing to their demands for democracy, equality and liberation.

Finally, we must oppose the intensifying Islamophobia the U.S. will use to justify its intervention in the Middle East—and the resulting restrictions on the civil rights and civil liberties of Arabs, Muslims and all of us here at home. In that sense, we share common cause across borders in the struggle for liberation from the American empire.

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P.S.

* <https://socialistworker.org/2014/08/28/obamas-new-war-in-iraq>