

Middle East & ISIS - Iraq and Syria: The struggle against the 'multi-sided' counterrevolution

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As a coalition of Sunni-based forces, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), took the major northern Iraqi city of Mosul and then most of the Sunni heartland in the north and west of Iraq, regional and western capitals went into crisis mode: the entire post-US occupation stabilisation had collapsed in a heap.

And the coalition leading this revolt consists of none other than the same forces which led the Iraqi resistance to US occupation throughout the middle years of the last decade. Yes, once again the arch-reactionary ISIS itself has revealed its brutality, with reported mass killing of captured soldiers, a crime against humanity; in the same way that monstrous acts, such as bombing work queues and Shiite mosques, were carried out during the anti-US resistance by al-Qaida in Iraq (i.e., what became ISIS); horrific repression is partly to blame for breeding horrific reactions. In both cases however, this most violent and irrational element does not define the movement, still less explain its strength.

These events involve both Syria and Iraq, with their long, relatively open, border occupied on both sides by ISIS. The rise of ISIS can be connected to two momentous events: the American Guernica on Iraq 2003-2008, and the vast multi-sided Iraqi resistance to that invasion and occupation; and the vast popular revolution in Syria, and the Assad regime's Guernica to suppress it over 2011-2014. In both cases, the victims have been overwhelmingly Iraqi and Syrian Sunni Arabs – the vast Sunni majority in Syria, and the significant Sunni minority in Iraq.

It is in the context of this overwhelming disaster faced by the Sunni masses of Syria and Iraq, and mass resistance to it, that ISIS has been able to grow, representing the most extreme and most sectarian reaction to this dual blitzkrieg.

Iraq and Syria: the forces ranged against both regimes and ISIS

It is important to understand, however, that in neither Syria nor Iraq is ISIS the only opposition, among the disenfranchised Sunni masses, and the popular masses more generally, to the sectarian-based capitalist regimes in power. While the media focus has been about "regime(s) versus ISIS," in reality, in both countries, there are three main forces in contention:

1. The Bashar al-Assad and Nuri al-Maliki regimes. Both are sectarian-based regimes: the Assad regime is a “secular” totalitarian regime heavily based among the elite of the Alawite religious minority; the Maliki regime is a sectarian, semi-theocratic, Shiite regime closely aligned with both the former US occupier, that facilitated its rise to power, and with the Shiite theocracy in neighbouring Iran.
2. The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), the most extreme Sunni sectarian and theocratic movement in the region, which has set up its own semi-state over parts of Syria and Iraq. A descendant of al-Qaida in Iraq, ISIS was disowned by al-Qaida last year for being unnecessarily and embarrassingly barbaric (though in fact the disagreement went back as far as 2005). It represents an “opposing counterrevolution,” formed partially from within the ranks of the uprisings.
3. In between, a vast opposition to the regimes which is also distinct from ISIS, in open war with it in Syria, and on and off at war with it in Iraq:

In Iraq, this consists of a range of “Sunni tribes” and other Sunni militias which have, over the last year or so, alternatively been fighting the regime alongside ISIS, or fighting against ISIS. This includes Sunni militia that were part of the Iraqi resistance to US occupation, whether pro-Saddam Baathist, Islamist or otherwise nationalist; and Sunni groups that were mobilised by the US and Saudi Arabia into the “Sawha” (Awakening) movement that helped defeat al-Qaida in 2007-8, but have since become disenchanted with the Shiite sectarian regime they had been drawn into propping up.

In Syria, this consists of all the armed manifestations of the Syrian revolution, from the secular Free Syrian Army (FSA, based heavily among the Sunni but not entirely, including some Alawite and Christian brigades and officers), moderate Islamist groups like the Mujahideen Army in the north and the al-Ajnad Union in the south, the Islamic Front, a loose coalition ranging from moderate to hard-line Islamists, and Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN), the official wing of al-Qaida in Syria, which however is markedly less hard-line than ISIS since their split in May 2013. While a favourite western media discourse is “rebel in-fighting,” in reality this does not exist at all; rather, all these forces act in unison in their war against both the Assad regime and ISIS; it is the war of all of them against ISIS that wrongly gets labelled this way.

These two struggles are related but different. The Syrian struggle began as a multi-sect democratic uprising which however has tended to become more Sunni in composition largely due to the class realities in Syrian society; the Iraqi struggle is explicitly Sunni against an explicitly Shiite-sectarian regime, and evolved out of a nationalist resistance to US occupation. The more advanced sectors of the Syrian revolution still hope to win non-Sunni support for a rising against then regime, no matter how unlikely that may now be; by contrast, the Iraqi revolt only aims to liberate Sunni regions – the ISIS-led attempt to conquer Shiite-dominated Baghdad or any other Shiite region would by definition be a reactionary and sectarian action.

What accounts for strength of ISIS?

What then accounts for the particular strength of ISIS, given that most accounts do not credit ISIS with superior numbers of troops to other resistance movements (indeed in Syria at least ISIS is vastly outnumbered, perhaps 10 to 1, yet in the second half of 2013 had taken control over much rebel-held territory before being expelled in January 2014)?

One simple explanation is that the extraordinary level of barbarism of the Syrian regime, and of the previous US occupation of Iraq, alongside the growing sectarianism and brutality of the current Iraqi

regime, will naturally produce an extremist and sectarian mirror within the opposition. This is certainly valid, yet does not entirely explain why the most brutal and extremist force appears so visibly powerful.

Another important factor is the simple fact that it controls regions of both countries that straddle their long border – when weakened on one side, it can retreat to the other side. When it builds up semi-state infrastructure when strong on one side, this can be used on the other side of the border. This gives ISIS simple practical strength.

Why ISIS just happens to control these regions would seem to be related to them being relatively economically backward, sparsely populated and partly “tribal” regions, in northeast Syria and northwest Iraq, where its unifying presence has brought a degree of security and some social services to otherwise forgotten regions. In contrast, the allied forces of the Syrian revolution, in one form or another, control liberated regions in the more developed and populous south, north-west and scattered parts of the centre, with their base among the peasantry and the urban poor in impoverished regional towns and ringed around major cities.

Importantly, however, these backward regions ISIS controls do have resources, including oil, which has greatly boosted ISIS funds, partly via oil deals with the Assad regime.

Then there is the question of funding. As the descendant of al-Qaida in Iraq, ISIS has been the recipient of significant funding from sections of the Gulf bourgeoisie long sympathetic to al-Qaida. Not the Gulf regimes, as is often brandished about with no evidence (supporters of the Syrian and Iranian regimes tend to use “Saudi Arabia” as a form of demonology and thus falsely attribute Saudi support to whoever they dislike); on the contrary, al-Qaida views the Gulf regimes as arch-apostates and seeks their overthrow. However, the anti-regime Gulf bourgeoisie is very powerful – they oppose these narrow monarchical regimes which “lock out” the majority of the bourgeoisie from political power; the US backing of these regimes, and the regimes’ subservience to US imperialism, has produced a fierce anti-imperialism among this oppositional bourgeoisie, no matter how regressive the form it takes. In this sense, the question of why ISIS is particularly powerful is no more or less complicated than why al-Qaida became powerful enough to attack New York.

Then there’s the role of the Syrian and Iraqi Baath, in quite different ways. The Alawi-led, “secular” Syrian tyranny may appear to be an obvious enemy of ISIS’ theocratic semi-state; however, they have a common interest in crushing the Syrian revolution, which is a threat to both due to its liberatory message; and its forces also happen to control regions geographically in between Assad- and ISIS-controlled regions, so there is a practical aspect to Assad-ISIS collaboration. Speculation about this underhanded collaboration between the two centres of reaction in Syria is therefore widespread, the oil deals being only the most pragmatic part.

At the very least, the Assad regime’s past collaboration of with Iraqi jihadists is well-established. Initially after 9/11, the Assad regime collaborated with the CIA in “renditioning” and torturing “terror” suspects for the US as part of the US ‘war on terror’ from 2001 to 2003. However, when the crazed Bush regime refused to reciprocate, by the mid-2000s Assad was encouraging Syrian jihadists to go to Iraq to help (or help undermine) the Iraqi resistance, partly to get them off his back in Syria, while placing obstacles in the path of the more crazed wing of US neocons who fantasised about taking their “success” in Iraq into Syria [1]. This policy was later reversed again after 2007 and Syria returned to the US “rendition” program between 2008 and 2011 after Obama came to power and US-Syrian relations improved. At this point, prominent Syrian jihadist and former key link to al-Qaida in Iraq, Abu al-Qaqaa, “was shot dead in mysterious circumstances” and “his funeral was attended by members of the Syrian parliament along with thousands of Islamists” [2].

However, after the outbreak of revolution in 2011, Assad again changed course, this time not related to Iraq however. The regime released hundreds of jihadists just as it was arresting thousands of democratic oppositionists – a clear ploy to undercut the democratic revolution and “sectarianise” the struggle. The fact that the Assad regime, and ISIS in Syria, hardly fight each other, but both fight the rebel coalition, is well-established: the regime can bomb schools, market-places, hospitals, refugee camps, entire cities to rubble; but ISIS headquarters in Raqqa stood proudly untouched by regime warplanes right up to a few days ago, looking like this:



<http://imgur.com/r/syriancivilwar/ZfTLX0G>.

The governor of Iraq’s Ninevah province, Ethyl Najafi, even claimed the Syrian regime had helped ISIS take over Mosul [3].

The role of the Iraqi Baath is different; unlike its Syrian counterpart, it is on the same “Sunni” side of the “sectarian” divide. Some of ISIS’s (ie, al-Qaida in Iraq’s) initial core came from the “Islamification” of some of Saddam Hussein’s former military officer corps during the resistance to US occupation; three of six top ISIS leaders were such “converts” [4]. This layer of former Baathists brought with them arms, skills, intelligence etc, a formidable backbone to the new jihadist group. Importantly however, this should be distinguished from the Baathist influence among some of the non-ISIS Sunni forces fighting today in Iraq, which have collaborated with ISIS to defeat Maliki but are already coming into conflict with it.

A Sunni uprising against a sectarian regime

It has become increasingly clear that the initial reports of an ISIS takeover of Mosul and the north were far too simplistic, though ISIS may be taking the lead role in places. It is now clear that the other Sunni-based militia throughout the region had had a gutful of Maliki’s sectarian repression and decided to temporarily throw their lot in with ISIS to drive the “Iraqi army,” which they viewed as an occupation army, out of the Sunni majority regions. While the purpose of this article is not to detail this, this reality has been widely exposed [5]. Indeed, regarding Mosul in particular, it is a stunning fact that the Maliki regime placed a known Shiite torturer and war criminal, General Mahdi Al Gharawi, in charge of this largest of Sunni cities; his actions were so brutal that even the US occupation regime and the Iraqi courts themselves had tried to prosecute him last decade [6].

Other Sunni-based movements involved in the uprising alongside ISIS include the Sufi-Baathist Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (JRTN), which includes many former officers of Saddam Hussein’s army; a variety of other Islamist or nationalist militias, including the Muslim Scholars Association/1920 Revolution Brigades, the Islamic Army (apparently MB-connected), the Rashidin Army, the Iraqi Hamas, the Mujahidin Shura Council, and the al-Qaeda-originated Ansar al-Islam; various Sunni tribal councils, including those such as the Anbar Tribal Council which had been part of the US-backed “Sawha” movement but have since become disaffected due to Maliki’s sectarian rule; and new groups emerging from the protest movement of the last year or so who have taken up arms to defend their movement against the regime’s repression. Some of these forces have formed

various shifting coalitions.

On the one hand, many who initially fled Mosul have returned, and have expressed a preference for even ISIS over the Maliki regime [7]. Many claimed their initial flight was due to fear of being bombed by the regime, as it had previously copied the US occupiers by again bombing Falluja. In contrast to its barbarity in Syria, where ISIS is in many ways seen as a foreign invasion, some reports suggested that ISIS in Iraq, where it has a real local base, was acting in a more mild way towards its Sunni constituents [8]; in any case, as its current drive against the regime depends on preserving, at least for the moment, its support among Sunni and its alliance with non-ISIS forces, it is likely to temper its repression for the moment. On the other hand, the breathtaking barbarity shown in the apparent mass slaughter of regime soldiers indicates that ISIS is still ISIS, and those forces in a temporary bloc with ISIS will have to confront it quite soon to avoid simply falling into a sectarian quagmire.

This dual process led to understandable speculation about the rapid collapse of Maliki's "Iraqi Army" in Mosul. The relative openness of the Assad-ISIS collaboration, the concurrent ability of Assad, Maliki and Iran to use the bogey of ISIS to demonise all opposition to the two sectarian regimes, and the continual refrain of US and other western leaders for years that they couldn't send even a bullet to the Syrian liberation struggle because such arms might get into the hands of al-Qaida, and the growing US chorus for military action against al-Qaida in Syria, led to an understandable conspiracy theory: Maliki had ordered his army to run away and leave Mosul to the tender mercies of ISIS, in order to goad the US into launching air strikes "against ISIS" in Iraq and Syria, ie, against the Sunni-based uprisings as a whole. [9].

While not every conspiracy theory is always false, it appears most likely that reality was far more simple: the part of Maliki's armed forces that were sectarian-based knew it would be pointless putting up any fight against the united Sunni insurgency in the overwhelmingly Sunni regions in the north; and to the extent that conscripts were Sunni, they downed arms and joined their brothers and sisters.

This temporary Sunni coalition is unlikely to last; tensions have been there from the start, and as ISIS tries to impose its medievalist theocratic repression on its current supporters, these tensions are bound to spread. Former General Muzhir al Qaisi, from "the General Military Council of the Iraqi Revolutionaries" - apparently one of the coalitions - which entered Mosul alongside ISIS, told the BBC's Jim Muir that they were bigger than ISIS, and that, moreover, he considered ISIS to be "barbarians" [10]. Violent clashes have already broken out in some regions in the north between ISIS and the Baathist Naqshbandis [11], while in other areas, local Sunni forces liberated themselves from Maliki regime occupation without ISIS and have declared they will fight off anyone from outside, including ISIS, trying to take over.

US-Iranian intervention?

Both the US and Iran have threatened intervention to shore up Maliki's tottering regime and beat back the Sunni uprising, under the guise of defeating ISIS terror. Iran has already sent in units of the Qods Force, a wing of the Revolutionary Guards, under its veteran commander Qassem Suleimani; there are reports of up to 500 of these militia in Iraq, and even possibly of 1500 paramilitary Basij militiamen arriving [12]. Meanwhile, the US has moved the aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush, its air wing, the cruiser USS Philippine Sea and destroyer USS Truxton towards the Gulf, while on June 20 Obama announced that 300 "special forces members" would be sent to Iraq to "train and advise the Iraqi security forces" (on top of 160 troops which are already in Iraq,

including 50 marines and more than 100 soldiers) and threatened “targeted” air strikes against the Sunni militia [13].

Despite their poor relations with one another, both the US and Iran have expressed the view that they need to cooperate against a common foe here. Last week, Obama said Iran can play a constructive role in Iraq [14], and US and Iranian officials met on the sidelines of nuclear talks to discuss Iraq. Iranian president Hassan Rouhani likewise said that Iran would “not rule out” working with the US on Iraq, while his deputy, Hamid Aboutalebi, said “Iran and the US are the only countries who can manage the Iraq crisis” [15].

Iranian deputy foreign minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian even went so far as to claim the US “lacks serious will for confronting terrorism in Iraq and the region” due to the US “delay” in fighting terrorism and Obama’s remarks which only promised hundreds of advisors rather than immediate air strikes [16].

In reality, this is not as new as it sounds, certainly not in Iraq and not even in Syria. From late last year, more and more US leaders and former leaders began deluging the media with hints that Assad remaining was preferable to the alternative, and that Iran could play a positive role in Syria – in both cases focusing on the threat posed by the Sunni jihadists [17].

Not surprisingly, the Syrian regime has also expressed solidarity with Maliki and offered to jointly fight ISIS. Then on June 15, the Syrian regime launched its most major strikes on ISIS in Syria for many months, if not ever, the regime even destroying ISIS headquarters in Hasakah. As if they didn’t know it was there before. Clearly, for Assad, it is time to try to cash in; ISIS has been a useful ally against the Syrian revolution, but as with Maliki and Iran, Assad also sees the value in using the horror at ISIS’s brutality to encourage the US’ geopolitical turn to continue, to hopefully again accepting Assad as a partner in the “war in terror” – as all local counterrevolutionary forces use ISIS as the bogeyman to taint the popular insurgency in both countries.

Assad has also spoken of what he sees as a shift in US policy, claiming “the United States and the West have started to send signs of change. Terrorism is now on their soil,” and therefore “current and former US officials are trying to get in touch with us, but they do not dare to because of the powerful lobbies that are pressuring them” [18]. Assad even praised the US for being “more rational than the French” regarding Syria [19], a clear note of thanks for the US towering betrayal of those it claims to support.

A US ‘war on ISIS’: a war on the Sunni uprising

The complication is that ISIS is itself a counterrevolutionary force; in theory, if the US struck very narrowly at ISIS itself, it could boost the non-ISIS forces among the resistance in both countries. And indeed, given that the Syrian rebel alliance of the FSA and Islamist rebels that has been the only force in the region actually fighting ISIS, it might be expected that the US may decide to finally, after 3.5 years, begin providing some serious weapons to the Syrian rebels to help them defeat ISIS. Yet this appears the furthest thing from the aims of US leaders in both countries.

This is very obvious in the case of Iraq. The US has provided the Maliki regime millions of dollars worth of heavy military equipment, including Humvees (armoured vehicles), tanks, helicopters and so on. Rather than try to build bridges with the Sunni population, the regime has used its weaponry to further alienate them by launching a brutal counterinsurgency, which led directly to their current bloc with ISIS. In this context, what does the prospect of US intervention “against ISIS” in Iraq mean in practice? To examine this, it will be useful to look back at the US invasion and the rise of al-

Qaida in the resistance.

Many analysts have claimed the US deliberately stoked sectarianism in Iraq after its 2003 invasion in order to divide and rule. However, while divide and rule is certainly a well-tested imperialist device, this analysis is too simplistic. It depends on the tactical needs of the moment. Sectarian division, after all, was hardly absent in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, which was based narrowly around a small section of the Sunni minority; the tyrannical regime had carried out large scale massacres of Shia, especially after the mass Shia uprising in 1991.

It is true, of course, that this sectarian division was not so strong on the ground, and that indeed, many tribes were mixed Sunni and Shia; there was nothing of the kind of sectarian warfare that characterised the period after the US invasion had destroyed the social fabric of the country.

However, the US relied precisely on the hatred the Shia majority felt for the regime as a factor that would ease its invasion to depose Hussein, and this cannot be ignored when analysing what happened next. Was it necessary for the US to stoke even more sectarianism after its invasion? Soon after the invasion, the mass resistance to US occupation centred among the Sunni population, partly because it had been a Sunni-led regime evicted from power by an imperialist invasion, and if the Hussein regime had had any base left, it would only have been among the Sunni minority. Arguably, therefore, the immediate US interest would have been to win over a section of the Sunni, and therefore to discourage sectarianism among its Shiite partners in the occupation regime.

But things went horribly wrong. First, occupation tends to create new enemies; so if the Shiite ruling bourgeois stooges were working with the occupation, happy to step in as the US evicted Hussein's regime, the Shiite masses, especially in the slums of Sadr City in Baghdad, felt the brunt of occupiers' everyday repression. The rise of the anti-imperialist Mahdi Army, led by Al-Sadr, represented this new popular resistance.

Second, the US occupation carried out a radical change of plan. For 12 years, the CIA and other US strategists had stressed the need to maintain the core of the Baathist regime, without Saddam and his immediate circle, as an imperialist imposed regime would still need the actually existing state apparatus of the Iraqi capitalist class to re-impose and re-stabilise capitalist rule. Yet in 2004, the US colonial proconsul ruling Iraq, Paul Bremmer, dissolved the Baathist police and armed forces and carried out a radical "de-Baathification" of the entire state apparatus.

It is hard to determine whether this was caused by a deliberate ploy to stoke further sectarianism; or by the neoconservative regime running the US getting caught up in its own "spread democracy" part of its rhetoric to the detriment of realist-based imperialist interests; or was simply due to inevitable class alignments, which then had unintended consequences.

I would argue that it was not the first of these. It is true that the de-Baathification program drove mostly Sunni out of work and onto the streets, thus intensifying Sunni opposition; and as it was a Shiite-dominated regime that carried it out, this would have boosted anti-Shia sectarianism among the Sunni. In fact, the first post-invasion job of current leader Maliki was assistant to the director of the de-Baathification program!

However, the dissolution of the Iraqi armed forces hit both Sunni and Shia working class Iraqis, thus massively boosting support for the anti-occupation Mahdi Army. As US forces imposed a Guernica-style terror on the Sunni city Falluja, al-Sadr led the Shiite poor of Badr City out on the streets in anti-sectarian solidarity with the Sunni, a stunningly opposite approach to the main pro-Iranian faction then backing the US-imposed regime, the Badr Brigades, and a challenge the occupiers were least expecting.

But whether these moves were only about crazed and unrealistic neoconservatives running amok is unclear, though it may be part of the picture. While the CIA line was theoretically perfect from a class point of view, there was a major practical problem: the simple size of the Shia majority (50-60%) compared to the Sunni minority around which the regime was based (25-30%). Those behind Bremmer's move may have made a very logical calculation, despite the risks involved in the massive instability it would temporarily lead to: capitalist class rule would never be re-stabilised unless the capitalist class from the majority Shia population get to rule; the regime and state apparatus left over from Hussein's eviction was far too narrow and narrowly Sunni to ever be useful.

Whatever the cause, facing the threat of a non-sectarian joint Sunni-Shia anti-occupation movement, it now may well have suited US interests to stoke sectarianism, to ensure Sunni and Shia focused on killing each other rather than targeting the occupiers. While the idea that the US would have deliberately encouraged al-Qaida in Iraq for this purpose is most likely a conspiracy theory as baseless as most, it could be said that, just temporarily, al-Qaida's criminal sectarian attacks on Shiite mosques and holy places played directly into the hands of the US occupation regime and the most sectarian wing of the Shia elite. The US responded in like manner, arming the most bloodthirsty sectarian forces among the Shia to go after the Sunni, massacre them just as al-Qaida was doing to Shia, and ethnically cleanse them from significant regions, including most of Baghdad. While doing this, the US cracked down on the Mahdi Army. However, after some time the sectarian atmosphere also neutralised the Mahdi Army as a threat as it too got drawn into the mutual slaughter.

Significantly, al-Qaida outside of Iraq could see the disaster that al-Qaida in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was causing. Al-Qaida head Ayman al-Zawahiri warned that the focus must be kept on defeating the US, and argued against targeting Shiite holy places and non-combatants, and against the grisly hostage killings [20]. Zarqawi rejected this advice, and this difference, going back to 2005, is important in understanding the differences today between ISIS, the extremely sectarian and brutal descendant of al-Qaida in Iraq, and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, the official wing of al-Qaida. Some might view it as odd that the actual al-Qaida is significantly more moderate in its behaviour than the dissident ISIS but the logic is simple: Zarqawi then and ISIS now aim to build a "state" of Iraq and the Levant; their main enemy are the opposing sects, mostly Shia, that are necessarily not part of their state-building project. Al-Qaida (including al-Nusra in Syria) is by contrast still more focused on the big picture and so has a dimmer view of counterproductive sectarian bloodletting which plays into the hands of the enemy.

While Assad's aims in facilitating the entry of Syrian jihadists into Iraq after 2003 can be explained as a mixture of keeping them off his back in Syria, and bogging down the US enough to discourage the nuttier wing of the neo-con fanatics who wanted to take their great "success" of regime change into Syria, it seems logical that the Syrian regime would have had the same use of a rise of sectarianism in Iraq at this juncture. After all, a narrow Alawi regime ruling over a vast disenchanted Sunni majority might have also seen the prospect of a joint non-sectarian Sunni-Shia struggle in Iraq as an existential threat at home.

But after a couple of years of sectarian slaughter had caused enough damage, the imperative to win a section of the Sunni away from al-Qaida in order to re-stabilise an Iraqi capitalist regime returned. In 2007, the US and Saudi Arabia, exploiting the exasperation increasingly felt by the Sunni with al-Qaida's excessive violence, armed Sunni tribes in Anbar province into the "Sawha" (Awakening) movement, which helped defeat al-Qaida throughout most of the region, and brought a new section of Sunni leadership into supporting the Shiite-led regime. It probably helped that around this time, the Syrian regime also returned to the policy of "renditioning" jihadists for the US "war on terror."

As has been widely reported, the current Sunni uprising, and the fact that the bulk of the Sunni

population is currently in league with al-Qaida's successor, ISIS, is due to the Maliki regime's betrayal of the promises made to the Sawha Sunnis, their intensified exclusion from power, and the brutal repression unleashed against those who attempted to protest this situation. As such, one might say that Maliki has also let down the US master in this regard. Certainly, there have been rumblings from US leaders and media about the need for Maliki to be more "inclusive" and so on.

Ultimately, however, imperialism has what exists on the ground. In Iraq, the Shia are the majority. Therefore, it will be the Shia bourgeoisie that will rule. And capitalist politics is sectarian, nationalist, exclusivist, chauvinist - anything other than "non-exclusive" - a proletarian concept - almost by definition. And therefore, whatever complaints the US might make, if the US launches air strikes "against ISIS," in the **current context** - before the rest of the Sunni coalition turns against ISIS of its own accord - these will be strikes against the Iraqi Sunni uprising as a whole, that will bolster Maliki's sectarian regime and its entire sectarian dynamic - if only because the US does not have an alternative ruling class regime to work through.

If US were to take 'war on ISIS' into Syria ...

But is this likely to be different in Syria, where there is no Iraq-style coalition with ISIS, but on the contrary, a magnificent resistance of all anti-Assad resistance forces against ISIS? In other words, with the US threatening possible intervention to stop ISIS, are we likely to see the US finally, after 3.5 years, come through with some serious military aid to the FSA to help it fight ISIS in Syria?

Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, the US has refused to provide arms to the secular Free Syrian Army (FSA), using the excuse that such arms might find their way to various Islamists or jihadists, especially the al-Qaida-linked forces such as ISIS.

Yet the irony is that while the US has still to provide a bullet to the FSA (other than a few weapons to one single, small, newly formed militia earlier this year), it is precisely the FSA and their Islamist rebel allies that have been the only force in the region actually fighting ISIS. The FSA and ISIS declared war on each other in August last year, and have been constantly at war since; then beginning in January this year, the rebel alliance of FSA/Mujahideen Army/ Islamic Front/Jabhat al-Nusra have been waging a sustained war to drive ISIS out of as much of the liberated territory as they can.

To understand why this is not likely to lead to any change in US policy towards the FSA, we need to look at a bit of background on US policy towards the FSA and the Syrian jihadists.

For the last year and a half, the major US aim of US policy has been to try to bludgeon a small section of "vetted" FSA into turning themselves into a "Sawha" (Awakening) movement to fight al-Qaida in Syria (named after the movement the US and Saudi Arabia armed to defeat al-Qaida in Iraq in 2007-8), mainly Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN, now the official wing of al-Qaida, since al-Qaida disowned ISIS); overwhelmingly, the main condition on which the US has offered to perhaps send a few guns to some select FSA units has always been that whoever receives them must be willing to launch a full frontal war on the jihadist forces.

From the first time FSA fighters were told by US agents that if they wanted arms they would need to turn them against Jabhat al-Nusra, back in late 2012, it was clear the US wanted the FSA to take on al-Nusra now, before defeating Assad - regardless of the blood-drenched division that would cause between two opponents of such a powerful and bloody dictatorship (and of course confusion, blood and division among the mainstream Islamist elements in between). When the FSA members said that unity against Assad's more powerful forces was paramount at present, the US officer replied "We'd prefer you fight Al Nusra now, and then fight Assad's army." [21].

It is difficult to conceive of this as anything other than a plan for mutual destruction; as usual, it is a question of class: whether the media claims US and Syrian “like” each other or not, there is nothing worse from the imperialist point of view than a revolution led by workers and peasants overthrowing an entrenched capitalist regime. The US would like a face-saving modification and rearrangement of the regime (the “Yemeni solution”, similar to the CIA’s original plan for Iraq), but that is an entirely different thing. In fact the aim of that is precisely to calm down the revolutionary fever. Short of that, the US wants it extinguished, and mutual suicide appears a good method.

Likewise, the communique from the G8 meeting last June called for a transitional authority (consisting of elements of regime and opposition) which would “preserve or restore” the Syrian state apparatus, stressing that “this includes the military forces and security services”, and called on both the regime and opposition forces to “destroy and expel from Syria all organisations and individuals affiliated to al Qaida and any other non-state actors linked to terrorism.” And on June 23, French president Francois Hollande demanded Syrian rebels expel “extremist” groups from areas they control as a condition for getting any French arms [22].

The FSA has always rejected this imperialist “advice.” According to FSA Colonel Akaidi, a military defector then heading the Aleppo military council, the US wants to turn the FSA “into the Sahwa,” but “if they [the US] help us so that we kill each other, then we don’t want their help” [23].

However, for its own reasons, the FSA spent much of the first half of 2013 clashing with JaN, as it took up the fight to defend the Syrian masses against JaN’s sporadic attempts to impose a new “Islamist” dictatorship, or to defend itself from JaN attacks. As such, the FSA was simply defending its own agenda, not that of the US. The FSA fought with its own aims, when it chose, the way it chose. And once it had imposed several defeats on JaN; and JaN even went so far as to offer some apologies; and once all the most violently reactionary elements, and nearly all the foreign, non-Syrian, elements of JaN split and formed ISIS mid-2013, there were no further clashes between JaN and the FSA that I am aware of; both focused on fighting the regime, alongside other Islamist fighters in between.

And while still undoubtedly a sectarian organisation that the FSA and other Syrian revolutionaries will have to deal with in the future, JaN markedly moderated its behaviour, feeling the pressure of its own Syrian base; indeed, JaN includes a significant base of former secular FSA fighters who only switched to JaN because it had better weapons.

In contrast, the whole of the second half of 2013 was an open war between the FSA and ISIS, as the FSA, representing the Syrian masses, took up the fight to defend the masses in liberated zones as ISIS tried to replace Assad’s secular-sectarian-fascist state with an Islamo-fascist state. And in January 2014, the Islamic Front and even JaN itself joined the FSA in this full-frontal war on ISIS.

While western imperialist observers, and most leftists, tend to put JaN and ISIS together into the same “al-Qaida” box, it is very important to understand the very crucial distinction that all Syrian revolutionaries make between the two. One may find it distasteful, but in the context of fight to the death against the sensational brutality of both the Assad and ISIS regimes, few Syrian revolutionaries will be in the mood to pay much attention to western sensibilities.

Yet despite this war on ISIS, the US has still refused to arm the FSA. One might assume that the FSA was doing what US imperialism had been telling them to do since late 2012, ie, fight al-Qaida. Even though the FSA is fighting with their own agenda and not that of the US, one might assume that imperialism should have been happy that it just happened to coincide with their interests, regardless of intent.

However, this was not good enough for the US.

First, US imperialism has made it clear all along that fighting ISIS is not enough – the US sees JaN as just as bad,* if not worse, than ISIS* in terms of US interests, precisely because JaN actually seems to be interested, in its own regressive way, in fighting the Assad regime, Israel and US imperialism, whereas ISIS' rhetoric about all this means little more than capturing already liberated zones and imposing theocratic repression against Syrians – both Assad and the US can live with that as long as it is restricted to the far north and east of Syria (and, until recently, remote northern regions of Iraq). But as JaN is currently on side, the FSA and all the rest of the Syrian rebel alliance are resolutely opposed to this US diktat and to splitting the anti-Assad (and anti-ISIS) resistance.

The US attitude to this joint rebel war on ISIS was summarised by Ben Hubbard in the New York Times, who wrote in January that “neither of the two sides in the rebel fighting presents a particularly attractive face to Western policy makers ... Further complicating the rebel landscape is the Nusra Front, one of Syria's most powerful rebel groups, which has also declared allegiance to Al Qaeda but whose fighters have fought alongside other rebel groups against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in recent days” [24].

Clarifying the US stand further, in late January, James Clapper, the US director of national intelligence, told the Senate intelligence committee that Jabhat al-Nusra “does have aspirations for attacks on the homeland (ie, on the US),” and claimed that some 26,000 of Syria's rebels were jihadist extremists [25]. Similarly, CIA director John Brennan claimed that JaN aimed “to recruit individuals and develop the capability to be able not just to carry out attacks inside of Syria, but also to use Syria as a launching pad.” Around the same time, an Israeli intelligence official put the number at 30,000 and claimed that after toppling Assad “or strengthening their foothold in Syria they are going to move and deflect their effort and attack Israel” [26]. Quoting such absurd numbers revealed that the US and Israel were not only talking about ISIS; in fact they were not even only talking about ISIS and JaN, but other non-al-Qaida groups as well.

The second reason that fighting ISIS is not good enough for the US is that it is all very well if the FSA fights ISIS, but the US has apparently offered to give some fighters some guns as long as they only use them to fight ISIS and do not use them to fight Assad, according to some rebels to whom this offer was made (who apparently are a split-off from the northwestern FSA coalition, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, SRF [27].

It appears that the SRF itself may also have been offered arms if it took up the fight against JaN as well as ISIS, because here is their commander rejecting this US diktat: “I am not fighting against al-Qa'ida... it's not our problem” [28]. By “al-Qaida” he clearly means JaN, because it was precisely the SRF that has led the attack on ISIS since January. Clearly, this was not good enough for the US. Incidentally, this is a totally secular commander and totally secular coalition – rejecting an imperialist diktat to fight al-Nusra jihadists, but who has led the war on the worse ISIS jihadists. Yet the kind of “leftist” who believes facts are irrelevant to analysis will no doubt call him a “US-backed jihadist.”

Even US hawks who advocate US intervention in Syria, such as John McCain, reveal their real aims often enough. Last year, McCain called for an “international force” to enter Syria to secure stocks of chemical weapons because “these chemical weapons ... cannot fall into the hands of the jihadists” [29]. His colleague in advocacy of hawkish intervention, Lindsey Graham, favours direct US drone strikes into Syria targeting the jihadists [30]; not surprisingly, Graham has also come out in favour of drone strikes in Iraq in the current crisis.

What all this means seems clear enough: if the US were to launch strikes “against ISIS,” and if such

strikes spread from Iraq into Syria, it is highly likely that the US would also attack JaN, despite the JaN's prominent role in the war on ISIS, especially in Deir-Azor in the east. And whatever one may think of JaN, at the present conjuncture, an attack on JaN would be a massive attack on the strength of the anti-Assad *and anti-ISIS* resistance in Syria and would be a tremendous boost to the regime.

Furious Syrian rebel assault on ISIS does not gain US support

In recent weeks leading up to the seizure of Mosul, the Syrian rebel alliance has been engaged in furious battle attempting to keep hold of the east Syrian city Deir-Azour against a sustained ISIS siege. While they fought ISIS, Assad helped ISIS by terror bombing the city [31], in effect, a joint siege; and after ISIS murdered 3 FSA commanders in Deir-Azour last week, regime warplanes bombed the mourning tent on June 21, killing 16 people [32]. And in comparison with the fight put up by the Syrian rebels, Maliki's troops in Iraq just ran away from ISIS.

And here is the crowning irony of the US line that "arms to the Syrian rebels might end up in al-Qaida hands" – somehow the same logic was not applied to the sectarian Iraqi regime, which was loaded with US arms, and so as the Iraqi army ran away from Mosul, a whole lot of heavy weaponry actually did fall into the hands of ISIS! And now ISIS is taking that weaponry back into Syria to continue its war against the Syrian revolution [33].

Even more sensationally, precisely now that this heroic resistance to ISIS in Deir-Azour might be expected to be utilised by the US for its own reasons, the US has moved even further away from taking such a course. On June 22, while visiting Assad's fellow recently-"elected" dictator Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi in Cairo, US Secretary of State John Kerry, announced he was "discouraging Arab nations from sending financial support to even moderate opposition Sunni groups in Syria" because such aid "could be used to help the growing insurgency in Iraq." Kerry said he planned to deliver the same message to leaders of other Arab states in the following days [34].

Very difficult for the FSA to win. If it fights together with al-Nusra against the Assad regime, any arms it receives might reach al-Nusra jihadists. If it fights against ISIS, any arms it receives might reach ISIS jihadists. It would require an extraordinary imagination to not see that US imperialism would prefer the FSA and the Syrian uprising to disappear from the face of the Earth.

Obama clarifies: No to revolution led by farmers and workers

And the reasons for this were given by none other than the chief executive officer of US imperialism on almost the same day Kerry made his remarks. Replying to a question from Norah O'Donnell on "CBS This Morning", about whether arming the "moderate forces" (presumably meaning the secular FSA revolutionaries) would have prevented the rise of ISIS, Obama claimed that despite having allegedly "spent a lot of time trying to work with a moderate opposition in Syria," there was no chance that sending them arms would have helped, because "when you get farmers, dentists and folks who have never fought before going up against a ruthless opposition in Assad, the notion that they were in a position to suddenly overturn not only Assad but also ruthless, highly trained jihadists if we just sent a few arms is a fantasy."

Now, we can note that the "lot of time" never included a bullet; and the fact that the FSA were not up against the jihadists until long after the revolution had started and after Assad had already slaughtered tens of thousands; and the fact that the farmers and "dentists" were joined by lots of other workers and above all by tens of thousands of deserters from the Syrian Arab Army who did indeed have military experience [35].

But aside from all this, I just want to note that Obama has done us a great favour.

Here we see, in plain black and white, the hostility of the head of US imperialism to the very idea of

a revolution led by mere farmers and workers against a regime of mega-capitalists. Imagine if arming workers and peasants did help them overthrow an oligarchy. Imagine how the example might spread. Imagine the horror of the US ruling class at the very thought. Obama just told us in plain English.

The rise of ISIS is of course an enormous threat to this workers' and farmers' uprising in Syria, and the just struggle in Iraq which it is temporarily attached to, due to the intense sectarian division it fosters between Arab working people of differing religious sect. Much has been said about ISIS abolishing the borders established by imperialism at Sykes-Pilot. This of course is a good thing, but only if done on the basis of unity of the Arabic working peoples as they abolish these imposed borders. ISIS by contrast abolishes those borders while setting up new ones, across sect lines. This indicates the fact that ISIS's anti-Shia "radicalism" is in fact a fundamentally conservative state-building project which is less threatening to imperialism and local ruling classes than the mainstream al-Qaida's continuing focus on imperialism and the local reactionary regimes, and certainly less than genuine popular revolution.

For the popular revolutionary wave to progress it will need to decisively defeat ISIS and its project for sectarian division. While sectarianism has grown as a negative factor in the Syrian struggle as a whole, the momentum of the united rebel fight against ISIS' extreme theocratism and sectarianism is a positive one in this regard; while in Iraq the Sunni will need to feel secure enough from Maliki's repression before throwing off the yolk of ISIS.

However, if ISIS brutality provides the cover for imperialism to intervene, the effect will only be counterrevolutionary – by also hitting at JaN in Syria and thereby weakening the Syrian revolutionary forces, and by solidifying Iraqi Sunni behind ISIS and entrenching the sectarian divide.

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P.S.

* Syrian Revolution Commentary and Analysis:

<http://mkaradjis.wordpress.com/2014/06/25/iraq-and-syria-the-struggle-against-the-multi-sided-counterrevolution/>

Footnotes

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[3] <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraqs-nineveh-governor-syria-helped-isil-seize-mosul/1700451185>

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<http://eaworldview.com/2014/06/iraq-special-al-maliki-government-abandon-mosul>
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- [16] <http://news.yahoo.com/iran-says-obama-remarks-show-us-not-serious-173636523.html>
- [17] I documented some of this process, and the geopolitical turn in US policy it entailed. Available on ESSF (article 32382), [Middle-East - The US, Iran, Russia-Syria and the geopolitical shift: Anything for the region's oppressed?](#).
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- [34] <http://www.ablx-boston.com/national/63241-john-kerry-urges-arab-nations-to-not-fund-groups-behind-isis-militants.html>
- [35] Some good refutations of Obama's logic here
<http://ammarabdulhamid.com/2014/06/21/the-lies-obama-tells-about-syria> and here
<http://claysbeach.blogspot.com.au/2014/06/odonnells-good-question-and-obamas-bad.html>