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ISIL Advances While Its Foes Cannot Unite

By Gary Leupp
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After the 9/11 attacks, every government in the world (except the Taliban) condemned al-Qaeda. But—have you noticed?—since George W. Bush wrecked Iraq and began the wholesale destruction of the status quo in the Middle East, al-Qaeda has spawned franchises and split-offs that constitute not mere terror squads but actual guerrilla armies.

These armies are receiving support or tacit encouragement from governments allied to the United States, particularly NATO ally Turkey and oil-rich Saudi Arabia.

In Syria the U.S. and Turkey unite in their determination to topple the government of Bashar Assad. But the situation is complicated; Syria is now divided between Syrian Army forces, Kurdish fighters, al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra, and ISIL. Both Washington and Ankara dislike ISIL, for different reasons, and are now formally allied to combat it.

The U.S. sees in ISIL a huge blow to its prestige. It proves that the Iraq War goals have utterly failed, and that the U.S. far from liberating Iraq has thrown it and its western neighbor into a period of horrific suffering. It's an embarrassment. Turkey is less concerned with ISIL's Youtube-documented cruelty and would perhaps prefer ISIL to either a Syrian Kurdistan or the survival of the Assad regime. But it feels obliged to cooperate with its superpower ally.

Washington values the Kurdish fighters in Syria as its most effective allies against both ISIL and Assad who Barack Obama (apparently employing powers bestowed on U.S. presidents by God) has declared has “lost legitimacy.” But Turkey fears the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish forces as allies of its own separatist Kurdistan Workers’ Party or PKK.

Washington wants to annihilate al-Nusra, along with its rival ISIL; Turkey is actively if secretly supporting the former, as an ally against Assad and some of his most effective armed opponents. More importantly, the al-Nusra fighters are allies against the Kurds. In other words, al-Qaeda has effectively driven a wedge between the two NATO allies.

The Turkish government made it clear in 2003 that it opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which like Syria shares a Kurdish-peopled border with Turkey. Ankara feared (correctly) that a U.S. invasion would destabilize the region and encourage Kurdish separatism in Iraq, Syria and Turkey itself. The Turkish parliament, to Washington’s consternation, refused to approve permission for U.S. troops to invade from Turkish territory, forcing the Pentagon to revise its war plans. Perhaps some in Turkey feel some *shadenfreude* as U.S. plans have gone so awry in the years since.

Recently U.S. military officials were infuriated when Turkey, having agreed with the U.S. to carve out a “safe zone” in northern Syria by jointly bombing ISIL forces, also targeted Kurds. That wasn’t part of the agreement! they protested. Worse, Turkey tipped off al-Nusra about the deployment of 53 Syrian insurgents recently trained by U.S. forces in Jordan and supposed to be the vanguard of a revived “Free Syrian Army.”

The U.S. has been utterly unable to recruit Syrians to fight against Assad and ISIL; in January the Pentagon publicly estimated it could train “more than 5,000 recruits” for the Free Syrian Army within a year. It had difficulties recruiting and was able to train precisely those 53 so far. Some people might conclude from that that young Syrian men, however they might despise both the regime and the religious crazies, are simply unwilling to work with the U.S. because they hate what it’s done to their region and what it represents in the world

The small force was captured and is now held prisoner by al-Nusra, which would ordinarily behead them but apparently holds off at Turkish request. Quel désastre!

In Yemen the U.S. and Saudi Arabia unite in support of the government-in-exile led by Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, the president who won an election without competition in 2012 after the U.S. pushed out its long-standing ally Ali Saleh to appease anti-regime demonstrators during the Arab Spring. Houthi rebels hailing from the Saudi-Yemen border region, who adhere to a sect of Shia Islam, drove the weak new president from power. This was in part because he failed to make inroads against al-Qaeda.

In January, with the capital of Sana’a occupied by the Houthi militia (meeting with minimal resistance), and his presidential palace surrounded, Hadi resigned and then fled the country. The U.S. was forced to withdraw its military advisors in Yemen and evacuate the embassy in February. Meanwhile al-Qaeda took over a secret military base where U.S. advisors had been stationed. (So much for plans, revealed in 2012, to establish U.S. military bases in Yemen.)

Under Hadi's watch al-Qaeda had expanded. The Houthis loath and fear them, knowing of their murderous actions towards Shiites all over the Muslim world.

The Saudi leaders on the other hand hate and fear the heretical Shiites, who constitute a significant minority in their kingdom as well as Yemen. They allege with little evidence that the Shiite Houthis are proxies for Iran. So the Saudis are bombing Houthi-held areas, with U.S. support. The Pentagon provides military intelligence to the (U.S.-trained) Saudi Air Force to help determine their air strikes.

So the U.S. and the Saudis are on the same side against the Shiite rebels. But the Saudis ignore the gains made by the al-Qaeda affiliate in Yemen, which U.S. intelligence has in the past called the main security threat to the U.S.

Bottom line: Gorge W. Bush's war on al-Qaeda, which he bombed in Tora Bora and for an interval drove out of Afghanistan (into Pakistan, mainly)—a war fought when al-Qaeda was a shadow of its current self—generated a period of colossal al-Qaeda expansion, some of it abetted by the U.S.'s own allies.

A couple training camps (initially set up with CIA assistance) in a remote area of Afghanistan, and cells of terrorists in various countries from the U.S. to Indonesia as of 2001 have morphed into a web of enclaves from Libya to Afghanistan (where ISIL is now making inroads against the resurgent Taliban).

Bush's war on Iraq, hot on the heels of the one in Afghanistan, drew al-Qaeda into Iraq with a vengeance. Temporarily defeated during the "surge" of 2007, the al-Qaeda group founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi ("Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia," which mutated into ISIL) retreated into Syria. There its numbers mushroomed due in part due to U.S. efforts to topple Assad. Reconstituting itself the Islamic State, it now controls a territory the size of Britain, collects taxes, issues drivers' licenses, and controls oil fields.

Last December with some fanfare, at the NATO headquarters in Brussels, diplomats from 59 countries formed a coalition to "defeat" ISIL. (It notably excluded the two countries that have done the most to resist ISIL advances: Syria and Iran.) However, few have participated militarily, and the Islamic State continues to expand. In May 15 ISIL captured the ancient city of Palmyra, with its fabulous ruins, from the Syrian Army.

Such is the weakness and division within the "coalition" and broader anti-ISIL forces that the world has been forced to sit by and watch as the Islamic State blasted the beautiful, 2000-year-old Temple of Baalshamin to the ground. Just the latest tragic result of Bush's wars without end.

The regime the U.S. wants to overthrow, and Russia wants to protect, cherishes the national heritage including the Palmyra ruins. It cherishes the Christian sites of Damascus, such as the House of Saint Ananias and Chapel of St. Paul, which will surely be destroyed if Islamists take the city. Yet the U.S. cherishing pipe dreams of regime change in Syria, to be affected by U.S. trained "moderates," refuses Russian proposals to build a coalition against ISIL including the Assad forces and Iran.

The U.S. blasts Assad for slaughtering civilians. While refusing to even count civilian deaths in its imperialist wars, it always exaggerates the “genocidal” violence of its targets, whether they be the Serbian Army in Kosovo in 1999, the Libyan regime in 2011, or the Syrian regime in recent years.

In fact, of the 220,000 people the UN estimates have perished in the civil war, from 115,000 to 140,000 were members of the Syrian Army and the National Defense Force. Anti-government forces including foreign forces have lost between 75,000 and 120,000.

Fatalities among foreign supporters of the regime such as the Hizbollah militia from Lebanon have been around 3000. In other words, civilian fatalities have been less than 15% of the total. And as we know, ISIL and al-Nusra have no hesitation to torture and kill civilians simply for their religions or the nature of their work. Last week the 82-year-old archeologist in charge of overseeing the Palmyra ruins was beheaded by ISIL and his corpse strung up as a warning to others. Another tribute to George W. Bush and his criminal wars.

More blasts leveling the treasures of humanity are in store. And it seems nothing can be done to prevent it. Shame on those who brought us to this pass.