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Why the U.S. Owns the Rise of Islamic State and the Syria Disaster

By Gareth Porter

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An Islamic State militant waves his group's flag as he and another celebrate in Fallujah, Iraq.

Pundits and politicians are already looking for a convenient explanation for the twin Middle East disasters of the rise of Islamic State and the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria. The genuine

answer is politically unpalatable, because the primary cause of both calamities is U.S. war and covert operations in the Middle East, followed by the abdication of U.S. power and responsibility for Syria policy to Saudi Arabia and other Sunni allies.

The emergence of a new state always involves a complex of factors. But over the past three decades, U.S. covert operations and war have entered repeatedly and powerfully into the chain of causality leading to Islamic State's present position.

The causal chain begins with the role of the U.S. in creating a mujahedeen force to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Osama bin Laden was a key facilitator in training that force in Afghanistan. Without that reckless U.S. policy, the blowback of the later creation of al-Qaida would very likely not have occurred. But it was the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq that made al-Qaida a significant political-military force for the first time. The war drew Islamists to Iraq from all over the Middle East, and their war of terrorism against Iraqi Shiites was a precursor to the sectarian wars to follow.

The actual creation of Islamic State is also directly linked to the Iraq War. The former U.S. commander at Camp Bucca in Iraq has acknowledged that the detention of 24,000 prisoners, including hard-core al-Qaida cadres, Baathist officers and innocent civilians, created a "pressure cooker for extremism." It was during their confinement in that camp during the U.S. troop surge in Iraq 2007 and 2008 that nine senior al-Qaida military cadres planned the details of how they would create Islamic State.

The Obama administration completed the causal chain by giving the green light to a major war in Syria waged by well-armed and well-trained foreign jihadists. Although the Assad regime undoubtedly responded to the firebombing of the Baath Party headquarters in Daraa in mid-March 2011 with excessive force, an armed struggle against the regime began almost immediately. In late March or early April, a well-planned ambush of Syrian troops killed at least two dozen soldiers near the same city. Other killings of troops took place in April in other cities, including Daraa, where 19 soldiers were gunned down.

During the second half of 2011 and through 2012, thousands of foreign jihadists streamed into Syria. As early as November 2011, al-Qaida was playing a central role in the war, carrying out spectacular suicide bombings in Damascus and Aleppo. Obama should have reacted to the first indications of that development and insisted that Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar keep external arms and military personnel and funding out of Syria in order to allow a process of peaceful change to take place. Instead, however, the administration became an integral part of a proxy war for regime change.

Seymour Hersh reported last year that an unpublished addendum to the Senate Intelligence Committee report on Benghazi revealed a covert CIA operation to arm Syrian rebels, in cooperation with Sunni allies' intelligence services. In early 2012, Hersh reported, following an agreement with Turkey, then-CIA Director David Petraeus approved an elaborate covert operation in which Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar would fund the shipment of weapons to Syrian rebels from stocks captured from the Gadhafi government. The scheme employed front companies set up in Libya to manage the shipments of arms in order to separate the U.S.

government from the operation. An October 2012 Defense Intelligence Agency report released by the Department of Defense to Judicial Watch confirmed the shipments of Libyan weapons from the port of Benghazi to two Syrian ports near Turkey beginning in October 2011 and continuing through August 2012.

A larger covert program involved a joint military operations center in Istanbul, where CIA officers worked with Turkish, Saudi and Qatari intelligence agencies that were also providing arms to their favorite Syrian rebels groups, according to sources who talked with The Washington Post's David Ignatius.

By November 2012, al-Qaida's Syrian franchise, al-Nusra Front, had 6,000 to 10,000 troops—mostly foreign fighters—under its command and was regarded as the most disciplined and effective fighting force in the field. The CIA's Gulf allies armed brigades that had allied themselves with al-Nusra—or were ready to do so. A Qatari intelligence officer is said to have declared, “I will send weapons to al-Qaeda if it will help” topple Assad.

The CIA officials overseeing the covert operation knew very well what their Sunni allies were doing. After the U.S. shipments from Benghazi stopped in September 2012 because of the attack on the U.S. diplomatic post there, a CIA analysis reminded President Obama that the covert operation in Afghanistan had ended up creating a Frankenstein monster. Even the now-famous account in Hillary Clinton's 2014 memoirs about Obama rejecting a proposal in late 2012 from CIA Director Petraeus for arming and training Syrian rebels does not hide the fact that everyone was well aware of the danger that arms sent to “moderates” would end up in the hands of terrorists.

Despite this, after rejecting Petraeus' plan in 2012, Obama approved the covert training of “moderate” Syrian rebels in April 2013. As the Pentagon has been forced to acknowledge in recent weeks, that program has been a complete fiasco, as the units either joined al-Nusra or were attacked by al-Nusra. Meanwhile, as Vice President Joe Biden pointed out in October 2014, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were pouring “hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons” into Syria that were ending up in the hands of the jihadists.

Unfortunately, Biden's complaint came two and a half years too late. By October 2014, more than 15,000 foreign fighters, including 2,000 Westerners, were estimated to have gone to Syria. Islamic State and al-Nusra Front emerged as the two major contenders for power in Syria once Assad is overthrown, and the Saudis and Qataris were now ready to place their bets on al-Nusra. In early 2015, after King Salman inherited the Saudi throne, the three Sunni states began focusing their support on al-Nusra and its military allies, encouraging them to form a new military command, the “Army of Conquest.” The al-Nusra-led front then captured Idlib province in March.

Obama, focusing on the Iran nuclear agreement, has given no indication that he is troubled by his allies' approach. If the Bush administration destabilized Iraq in order to increase U.S. military presence and power in the Middle East, the Obama administration has countenanced a proxy war

that has destabilized and Syria because of his primary concern with consolidating the U.S. alliances with the Saudis and the other Sunni regimes.

Although it has been almost a rigid rule that pundits must ascribe U.S. fealty to its Saudi alliance to oil interests, oil is far from the top of the list of U.S. interests today. More important to our national security state is the interest of the Pentagon and the military services to protect the military bases they have in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE. Their need to preserve those alliance relationships is intensified by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) cornucopia of military contracts for U.S. arms manufacturers that assures enormous profits will continue to flow for the foreseeable future. One estimate of the total at stake for the Pentagon and its private allies in military relationships with the GCC is \$100 billion to \$150 billion over two decades.

Those are crucial bureaucratic and business stakes for the U.S. national security state, which is usually driven by the bottom lines associated with different courses of action. Especially given the administration's lack of a coherent geopolitical perspective on the region, the security state's interests offer a persuasive explanation for Obama's effectively farming out the most important element of its Syria policy to regional allies, with disastrous results.