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The Effort To Exonerate Team USA for the Rise of ISIS

By David Mizner
January 27, 2016

Assad is primarily responsible for the rise of ISIS. No one else is even close, with the possible exceptions of former Iraqi presidents Maliki and Hussein. That's the predictable message of the State Department and its proxy reporters at outlets like Vox and BuzzFeed. The propaganda can be crude to the point of absurd. In Mad Max's world, Iran bears more blame than the United States for ISIS, and George W. Bush would surely take comfort in analysis like this and this:

But on the question of Assad's responsibility and the corresponding responsibility of his imperial opponents, there's apparently a real debate to be had among thinking humans. In Jacobin and Salvage, leftists go a long way toward siding with State and the BuzzVoxers.

While more or less holding the United States to account for its ISIS-creating actions in Iraq pre-2011, they exonerate the US and its regional allies for ISIS's emergence as a force in Syria, which they attribute solely to Assad. In so doing they erase the war on Syria, which honest analysts would acknowledge even if they believe Assad to be a monster of Hitlerian proportions.

Both Jacobin and Salvage claim that Assad's releasing jihadists from prison in 2011 contributed mightily to the rise of ISIS. Salvage, the magazine founded by Richard Seymour and his comrades, says Syria's ex-prisoners are one of the three primary forces within IS, along with

Iraqi Baathists and foreign fighters. It didn't deign to provide any evidence, so I went looking for some.

This post by Kyle Orton says that, "In May and June 2011, the regime turned loose from its prisons violent jihadists." But he links to two articles covering the Syrian's government granting of general amnesty, which the press depicted at the time as an attempt to placate the opposition. The opposition itself received it as such. "Too little too late," said one member of the opposition.

Nonetheless, Orton goes on to say that in 2011 the Syrian government released future jihadist leaders Abu Musab, Hassan Abboud, Zahran Alloush, and Ahmed Abu Issa. I suppose I'll take his word for it, but these bad men didn't join ISIS. They joined Al Qaeda, Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Sham, and Suqor a-Sham, respectively. These groups are indeed brutal and reactionary – and they are proxy forces of US client states trying to overthrow the Syrian government.

This article at Huffington Post – "There Would Be No ISIS Without Assad – likewise promises to establish a connection between Syria's ex-prisoners and ISIS but manages only, via a link to a Politico piece, to connect them to Al Qaeda.

I'm not saying ISIS contains no people released from prison by the Syrian government, but if they made up a significant part of its leadership or rank-and-file – if they represented, as Salvage alleges, one leg of the stool supporting ISIS – evidence would surely be easier to come by. Aron Lund, who seems to be one of the more independent-minded of the popular Syria analysts, has this to say:

We know, by contrast, that all 12 of the judges who preside over ISIS's court system in Raqqa are Saudi. They're perhaps some of the hundreds of extremists Saudi Arabia has allowed to fly to Syria out of the Riyadh airport. (The Kingdom also reportedly sent more than a 1,000 death row inmates to go fight in Syria in exchange for commutations.) ISIS also includes many fighters from the Caucasus, Afghanistan, North Africa, and Europe, and that many, if not most, of these have entered Syria through Turkey.

Yet the ISIS-creation stories from Jacobin and Salvage include none of this. Not only do these leftist outlets pass along imperialist propaganda about Assad's "giving" ISIS hundreds of fighters by opening his prisons; they ignore the role of US allies in funneling ISIS-bound fighters into Syria.

In fact, the words "Turkey" and "Saudi Arabia" appear nowhere in the Salvage piece. In Jacobin, Adam Hanieh, who elsewhere has written solid stuff, doesn't mention Turkey's role and dismisses the idea that "ISIS is a tool of the Gulf States," because "there is little convincing evidence that ISIS is directly funded, or armed, by Saudi Arabia or any other Gulf state." Leaving aside the fact that if Saudi Arabia directly supported ISIS, it would do so covertly ("ISIS, in fact, may have been a major part of Bandar's covert-ops strategy in Syria," writes Steve Clemons), there are other steps Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey have taken with the encouragement of the United States to strengthen ISIS.

There is, in fact, a fairly impressive compilation of evidence pointing to the role of Turkey in the rise of ISIS. It includes video and audio evidence of a meeting of an ISIS affiliate in Istanbul and allegations from an array of sources – opposition politicians in Turkey, intelligence services of other countries, and Kurdish officials in Syria – who claim that Turkey has allowed ISIS militants and weapons to go back and forth across the border and even directly armed and trained ISIS fighters. The case is circumstantial in places, to be sure, but compared to the case against Assad, it's a smoking gun.

And it's a fact that, on top of the aforementioned funneling of militants into Syria, US client states allowed wealthy individuals to fund ISIS. Did the governments themselves finance ISIS? In 2014, once ISIS had become a force, General Dempsey, Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified that, yes, US allies had directly funded ISIS – as assessment that Lindsay Graham seconded. In any case, the funding was no secret – Kuwait was a hub for ISIS financing – and US allies didn't little to nothing to crack down on it.

These governments also sent in weapons that ended up the hands of ISIS. Was the arming direct? Regardless, to send weapons to the opposition was to arm ISIS, both because ISIS routed groups and took their weapons and because early on opposition groups collaborated with ISIS.

Aping US government officials, who barely mentioned ISIS until mid-2014, US press accounts of the group's rise in Syria tend to ignore its formative months (although they flashback to 2011 for the purpose of indicting Assad.) They pick up the narrative when the groups officially backed by the United States and its allies were fighting ISIS. To read the BuzzVoxxers, or some socialist outlets, you'd have no idea that ISIS ascended in Syria partly due to the collaboration and conciliation of other opposition groups. Josh Landis details these alliances and calls them the "real" reason for ISIS's rise in Syria:

"The most prominent case-in-point is Colonel Oqaidi, who used to head the Aleppo FSA military council. Oqaidi constantly downplayed the idea that ISIS constituted a threat, describing his relations with ISIS as "excellent"...The other rebel groups that assisted ISIS in the wider conflict here included Liwa al-Tawhid, Ahrar ash-Sham, Suqur ash-Sham, and FSA-banner groups such as Liwa al-Hamza, Ibn Taymiyya (both Tel Abyad area) and Liwa Ahrar al-Jazira al-Thawri...Contrary to what ISIS members and supporters claim, there was no pre-planned 'sahwa' against ISIS. Till the very end of 2013, IF and its constituent groups tried to resolve problems with ISIS peacefully."

The FSA, remember, was the official American proxy so the United States was arming a group that it knew was collaborating with ISIS. In 2013, ISIS leader Abu Atheer told Al Jazeera that his group had cordial relations with the FSA and bought weapons from them.

Yet in popular ISIS creation narratives the myth of American innocence persists. The more intrepid western reporters will touch on the role of US client states yet exonerate the United States, as if Saudi Arabia and co. act wholly independently of the world's most powerful country. And even if you believe that clients states have the desire and capacity to go rogue, there's no evidence suggesting that US government officials tried to deter their ISIS-empowering actions during the group's all-important early months in Syria. Biden's tepid yet much-discussed

criticism of allies for supporting ISIS came late in 2014 when ISIS was replacing the government as the primary, official rationale for US military action in Syria. As Biden was traveling around to apologize for his remarks, engaging in client management, no reporter thought to ask why no US official had said or done anything about their empowering of ISIS in the months and years prior.

The media complicity persisted despite last year's declassification of a 2012 military intelligence memo showing that the United States had determined both that its allies sought to create a "Salafist principality in eastern Syria" and that sectarian reactionaries – "The Salafist, The Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI – were the "driving forces" in the opposition. Apologists responded predictably to the document: they challenged the most expansive interpretations and ignored the smaller yet still-damning ones.

It's not so much the memo itself that exposes US culpability but the memo combined with the subsequent actions (and inactions) of the United States vis-à-vis its allies and the Syrian opposition. More confirmation that revelation, the memo shows what was already clear: 1) that the United States was content for its allies to try to destroy Syria by fueling the most extreme elements of the opposition, including ISIS, 2) that because extreme elements dominated the opposition, to support it was to empower these elements, including ISIS, and 3) that the United States, no bystander to this effort, contributed to it.

It's not hard to understand why the BuzzBeasters exonerate the United States, even if doing so means ignoring reports in their own publications. The motive of socialists is a little harder to discern. Or perhaps not. Their purpose, it seems, is to pin all the blame on Assad, not just for ISIS but for all of it: the hundreds of thousands of deaths, the millions of refugees, the staggering suffering. The true story of the rise of ISIS, in context, exposes the degree of aggression against Syria, and once that comes to light, it's hard to cling to the view that this war is, at its core, a battle between a tyrant and a progressive revolution.