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The Rise of ISIS and Other Extremist Groups: the role of the West and Regional Powers

By Bouthaina Shaaban
January 29, 2016



This essay examines the role of Western and regional players (i.e. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) in inflaming the conflict and the growth of terrorism in Syria. It examines the attempts to break up Syria's civilian and military institutions, the delegitimization of the Syrian government, the attempts to procure a UN mandate for a military intervention in Syria, the imposition of suffocating economic sanctions on Syria, and most importantly the support that Western and regional powers gave to a plethora of armed groups, including al-Qaeda and ISIS, to fight the

Syrian government. The latter point is scrutinized in order to highlight how the United States, and its allies in the region, cynically employed extremist groups in Syria to achieve geopolitical gains, thus leading to wider regional upheaval, the effects of which will most certainly go beyond the West Asia region.

This essay then moves to examine the crucial differences between the US-led campaign against ISIS, and the Russian efforts in Syria, in addition to examining the central role of the Syrian government and army in the fight against terrorism. Finally, this paper examines the dangers of extremist ideologies being espoused and promoted by governments and individuals in the Gulf region, and their effect on social cohesion in targeted countries, with Syria being the latest example. Throughout the proceeding points, special attention will be given to the role played by Western and Gulf mass media and the false narratives it propagated about the conflict in Syria and the wider West Asia region.

A Prelude to ISIS: Western destabilization of Syria

The Syrian government's immediate response to the protests, despite the violent incidents at the very onset of events, was reconciliatory, as some of the demonstrators had genuine demands. On 24 March 2011, the Syrian leadership convened a long and important meeting in an effort to contain what seemed to be a looming crisis. I was asked to hold a press conference in order to acknowledge, in the name of the leadership, the people's legitimate demands and to announce decisions and measures that addressed most of these demands.

On that day, I announced to the Syrian people the lifting of emergency laws, in place since 1963, and a comprehensive reform package that would lead to further political freedoms, a multi-party law, and the drafting of a new constitution for Syria. Next day, people told me that they out to have dinner celebrating Syria averting a looming crisis. A feeling of relief prevailed all over the country due to the leadership's quick response to the demands.

President Bashar al-Assad also ordered the immediate release of all those detained during the unfortunate events that took place in Deraa the week before. Thousands of Syrians from all walks of life, dozens of delegations from all Syrian cities and villages flocked to the Presidential Palace for direct dialogue with the President. I also met many delegations, including local opposition. I was most happy to engage the youth, connect with their ideas, and listen to their aspirations; the mood was far from confrontational. Many more dialogue initiatives were taken at every level of government and civil society.

This conciliatory approach, however, was met with much worse intransigence by those who claimed to represent the Syrian people and was by then occupying much of the airtime on Al-Jazeera and al-Arabyia. These two channels played an inciting role, encouraging people to protest and rebel against the Syrian government, and they constituted the primary source for news about Syria to all Western media outlets.

On 29 July 2011, an obscure group of seven men, dressed in military uniforms announced the formation of the "Free Syrian Army" on YouTube. The world was supposed to believe that out of 300,000 officers and soldiers constituting the Syrian Armed Forces, seven men were to

represent a legitimate fighting force to replace that institution. Apparently, they did, at least to the West and their Turkish and Arab backers. The venture grew into 15,000-armed men based at camps in southern Turkey. Their spokesperson promised immanent action to “liberate” Syria.¹ Turkey, a member of NATO, was now hosting an army of insurgents on its territory, the composition of which was largely unknown, threatening to invade a sovereign nation with the aim of overthrowing its government under the veneer of “freedom fighters.”

The depth of Turkey’s commitment to sponsor these terrorists, whether in 2011, or later in 2015 when they became known as ISIS and al-Nusra, is represented by the shooting down of the Russian fighter jet operating against terrorists in Syria.

Only five years later that Western think tanks woke up to the fact that “neither desertions nor defections have significantly weakened the [Syrian] military or its chain of command.”² A study by the Carnegie Endowment’s Middle East Center found that most “defections”, little as they may be, happened for economic motives and were mainly towards “well-funded jihadist militias,” as opposed to the so-called Free Syrian Army.³

The attempt to break up Syria’s institutions was not limited to the armed forces. Many officials, from all levels of government, including myself, were invited, and in many ways pressured and harassed, to “defect.” They were offered financial incentives and –ironically– a place in the government of “new Syria.” When a government official refused the “lucrative offers,” threats against their personal safety and family soon followed. Eventually, many Syrian government officials and I were sanctioned by the European Union and the United States, simply for refusing to quit our job and relinquish our duty. The objective of breaking up both the military and the civilian institutions of Syria by any means necessary were clear from the onset.

On 18 August 2011, US President Barack Obama called for the ouster of President Asad.⁴ The United States was yet again committing itself to changing the political regime of a sovereign country. Obama’s statement constituted a green light for another serious attempt to usurp legitimacy from the Syrian government. By the end of August a group of “opposition” figures gathered in Istanbul, under the auspices of the Turkish government, announced the formation of the “Syrian National Council.” This grouping enjoyed no popular or political legitimacy, yet Western nations, Turkey, as well as Qatar and Saudi Arabia began to deal with them as the sole representative of the Syrian people, aiding and abating their intransigence and their refusal to any national dialogue initiatives that would end the crisis and the bloodshed.

We cannot ascertain what sort of deals was made under the table –similar to those between the French intelligence services and the Libyan National Transitional Council. The efforts were given a serious impetus when in November 2011, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, backed by the nascent Muslim-Brotherhood-led regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, succeeded in freezing Syria’s membership in the Arab League. The decision was followed by Arab sanctions against Syria, setting the stage for American and European enforced single measure sanctions that would prevent Syrians from acquiring many essentials including heating fuel and cancer treatments.⁵

The anti-Syria efforts culminated in the ironically-named “Friends of Syria Group” meeting in Tunisia in February 2012, which included among others the United States, France, UK, and

Germany, in addition to Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. This group tried to confer legitimacy and offer support to the so-called National Council and Free Syrian Army; calling for action-a-la-Libya that would see them replace the legitimate Syrian government.⁶ The “activists” on the ground linked to the Turkey-based opposition began to circulate banners calling for a no-fly zone, a buffer zone, and international “humanitarian” intervention in Syria.⁷

These demonstrators were filmed and Western and Gulf-Arab mainstream media showed the clips repeatedly; while footage showing hundreds of thousands flooding the streets of Damascus and other cities supporting their government against any foreign intervention did not make the cut.

Challenging Western Hegemony: The Double Veto

The “Friends of Syria” sought tirelessly to gain a UN mandate for the process of delegitimizing the Syrian government, and imposing the Turkey-based “National Council” as a representative of the Syrian people; let alone soliciting a mandate to carry on a military intervention similar to the one in Libya. These efforts to breach Syria’s sovereignty were repeatedly met by a joint Russian-Chinese veto at the United Nations Security Council (four in total by May 2014). The first attempt was on 4 October 2011, followed by a second one in February 2012. In the night before the second attempt was made under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, violent clashes erupted in the central city of Homs. Media outlets reported throughout the night that Syrian security forces were committing atrocities and killing hundreds of people, just hours before the Security Council session. This behavior became a pattern. On 19 July 2012, the Security Council met to discuss another Syria-related resolution presented by the Western powers, and it was again blocked by a Russian-Chinese double veto.

Just three days before this session, four of Syria’s top generals were assassinated, and thousands of gunmen tried to break into the city centers of Aleppo and Damascus, in an operation they dubbed “The Volcano.” Information leaked two years after the event indicated that this was a complicated American-Turkish plan to overtake Damascus. Russia’s foreign minister Sergey Lavrov explained the reasoning behind the double veto(s): “The veto [right] is not a privilege but a great responsibility. Thanks to the veto imposed by Russia and China several times we can say that a chance for transition to the political settlement process has emerged in the Syrian crisis. And it is absolutely true that the Russia-China veto has prevented Syria’s transformation into Libya.⁸”

Outside the Security Council, an international working group, which in addition to the Arab League, France, Britain, and the United States, included Russia and China, met in Geneva in June 2012. The group issued the “Geneva Communiqué,” which emphasized a Syria-led political solution for the crisis based on dialogue between Syrians. Western powers however largely ignored the outcomes of the meeting when they began to recognize the Syrian National Coalition (the offspring of the National Council) as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

The Arab League, under Qatari leadership, went as far as giving them Syria’s seat at the 2013 Arab Summit in Doha. This unelected “coalition,” like its predecessor, enjoyed no legitimate popular mandate, little presence on the ground in Syria, and many of its members had ties to

terrorist organizations. Conferring legitimacy on this group of Istanbul-based figures enabled them to call on Western and Arab countries to fund and arm the so-called Free Syrian Army. This “army” however proved to be no more than a franchise name; arms and funding actually went to the real forces on the ground, i.e. the radical Islamist terrorist groups –as the following section of this paper will show.

The dismantling of Syria’s chemical stockpiles in late 2013 was supposed to be the first joint action between Russia and the United States that may lead to a political solution of the Syrian crisis. It was in this spirit that both the US and Russia called for convening *Geneva II Conference* in Montreux, and then in Geneva in January and February of 2014. Although Sergey Lavrov and John Kerry agreed to conciliatory opening speeches, Kerry’s speech may, in all fairness, be described as a war speech against the Syrian government.

Two important things preceded the speech. First, the US total rejection of Iran’s presence, despite the fact that the UN General Secretary had already sent an invitation to Iran but was later forced to rescind it. Second, the United States and Turkey rejected the presence of any Syrian opposition except the Turkey-based “Syrian National Coalition.” In the two rounds of talks in January and February 2014, representative of the Syrian government stressed that the top priority in Syria was the fight against terrorism, and that all countries should participate in this effort because terrorism in Syria constituted a real threat for the region and the world at large. No one was prepared to heed the warnings of the Syrian government or to take the dangers to world peace seriously.

The West joins forces with al-Qaeda

It only took fourteen years after the tragic events of 9/11 for a representative of a Jihadi group closely linked to al-Qaeda to be able to write an op-ed for a major American publication: *the Washington Post*. Labib Nahhas, the head of foreign relations for Ahrar al-Sham group, wrote an article calling on the United States to join efforts with his organization to “end the reign” of Bashar al-Asad.⁹ Ahrar al-Sham is, of course, a terrorist organization that adopts Salafi-Jihadism as its ideology and is part of the Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) coalition, which also includes Jabhat al-Nusra, the official al-Qaeda branch in Syria. Al-Qaeda had taken advantage of the chaos in Syria, as it did in Iraq and Libya, to appear on the scene first as al-Nusra, later joined by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (formerly al-Qaeda in Iraq). Yet when the Syrian government first warned of al-Qaeda’s presence in Syria, the declaration was met with doubts, and at times ridicule, from mass media.

Although Syria had suffered terrorist attacks in the decade before. When al-Nusra claimed responsibility for a dual car bombing in Damascus on 23 December 2011, the Istanbul-based opposition accused the Syrian government of fabricating the whole episode.

Al-Qaeda in Syria, in both its al-Nusra and ISIS manifestations, is however very real, as the world was soon to find out. In fact, so real was al-the Qaeda threat in Syria that the US would come to create a wobbly coalition, whose simple purpose is exterminating ISIS. After 9/11, the Syrians sympathized with the US, saying: “We know how you feel, we have been there before in the 1980s, when terrorism struck in the heart of our towns and cities.” We actually shared

intelligence with them and were thanked by the Bush Administration for helping save American lives during a 2006 terrorist on the American Embassy in Damascus.¹⁰ We expected the same from Americans –both people and government– but instead, we got nothing but a vicious media campaign and US backing for an ugly sectarian war.

When violence escalated in Syria, the “Free Syrian Army” franchise quickly disappeared from the battlefield, but not from the media. The real forces on the ground were al-Nusra, Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Mujahedeen (Army of Mujahedeen) and other Jihadi groups –including ISIS. These groups, with foreign support, soon turned major city such as Aleppo and Homs into battlefields, barricading themselves in residential areas and causing a mass-exodus of civilians.

The Syrian Army was soon fighting on an endless number of fronts. It had to protect neighborhoods and towns, power lines and water sources, factories and public institutions. Everything and everyone was under attack, as this chapter will show in a later section. Jihadis from dozens of countries, including veteran Chechen ones, soon joined the terrorists in Syria.¹¹ NATO weapons were smuggled from wartorn Libya to Syrian jihadis. ¹² Terror tactics never seen before were used against the Syrian people. Terrorists would dig tunnels underneath residential areas, fill them with explosives, and then detonate them, knocking down entire buildings. They would relentlessly shell city centers with mortars, rockets and “hell canons” –a nightmarish weapon that lobs canisters loaded with hundreds of pounds of explosives and shrapnel.

It wasn’t late before ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) began to dominate the scene. Yet when the organization scored its first big “victory” in the summer of 2013, overrunning the Menagh airbase north of Aleppo with its ally al-Nusra, after dozens of suicide attacks, the Istanbul-based opposition issued a statement congratulating the Syrian people for this “achievement. ¹³” Al-Jazeera interviewed ISIS’s war chief Omar al-Shishani (the Chechen) from within the airbase, a man who would mastermind the organization’s biggest atrocities from beheadings to the Mount Sinjar tragedy. The reader might notice a discrepancy here; I am mostly citing Western media sources, yet at the same time criticizing them. The reason is quite simple. Even though the world media reported the Jihadi surge, the dominant narrative was that all of it was in response to Syrian government atrocities, claiming that the “regime” had purposely transformed the country into a magnet for terrorists.

This narrative remained in place even when ISIS became the West’s “number one enemy” in the region, in addition to its sidekick al-Nusra. However, no one was asking the real and necessary question: How were all these Jihadis able to group in the tens of thousands, arm and fund themselves and cross into Syria? Regardless of what was being presented to the world, decision makers in the West, and especially the United States, not only knew very well the factors behind the escalation of the conflict in Syria, but also helped them grow. The weapon shipments from Libya mentioned above, were actually funneled through a CIA and MI6-run back channel highway dubbed the “rat line.”¹⁴ These weapons crossed from southern Turkey into Syria to the hands of the Jihadis, al-Nusra and ISIS.¹⁵ Furthermore, Western powers knew exactly the eventual outcome of these actions. A recently declassified secret US intelligence report, written in August 2012, predicted –and even welcomed– the prospect of a “Salafist principality” in

eastern Syria and an al-Qaeda-controlled Islamic state in Syria and Iraq.¹⁶ The American Defense Intelligence Agency document identifies al-Qaeda in Iraq (which morphed into ISIS) and fellow Jihadi groups as the “major forces driving the insurgency in Syria,” and states that “western countries, the Gulf states and Turkey” were supporting the opposition’s efforts to take control of Eastern Syria.¹⁷ Raising the “possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality,” the Pentagon report goes on, “this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).”¹⁸ Last year, US Vice President Joe Biden complained to students at the Harvard Kennedy School that America’s biggest problem was its allies. “The Turks, the Saudis, the Emirates, etc., what were they doing? They were so determined to take down [President Bashar] al-Asad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Asad.”¹⁹ He also said that Turkey admitted it had let too many foreign fighters cross its border into Syria. These policies ended up helping militants linked to al-Qaeda (i.e. al-Nusra Front) and ultimately ISIS, Biden explained.²⁰ Biden eventually apologized for making these remarks, which came weeks after the United Nations Security Council adopted a set of resolutions barring countries and individuals from funding and arming both ISIS and al-Nusra. Nevertheless, these resolutions were never truly implemented as no action has been taken against countries or individuals known to be financing, arming or facilitating movements of terrorists.

The United States blacklisted al-Nusra Front in 2012, and bombed its headquarters in 2014. Nonetheless, by early 2015, America and its allies were preparing another strike against the Syrian government, the spearhead of which was none other than al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front. In the spring of 2015, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar put together a nightmarish amalgamation of Jihadi groups to strike in northern Syria. “The Army of Conquest” coalition included in addition to Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra Front, groups of Central Asian, Chechen and Chinese-Uyghur Jihadis.²¹ Advancing from their bases in southern Turkey, the terrorist hoard stormed the Syrian province of Idleb. Outrageously, the US-run Military Operations Center (Also known as *the MOC*), based in the Turkish city of Antioch, planned the offensive.²² Furthermore, the United States supplied some groups it deemed “moderate” with US-made TOW anti-tank missiles to help with the Idleb offensive.²³

These missiles were launched at the Syrian Army’s tanks and vehicles, clearing the way for the Jihadi Army to overrun the cities of Idleb, Ariha, and Jisr al-Shughur, killing and displacing thousands of innocent civilians –many of whom eventually found their way to Europe across the Mediterranean.

Comparing Russian and American efforts against terrorism

In August 2014, the United States and a coalition of 60 countries (including Saudi Arabia and Qatar), decided it was time to “degrade” and eventually destroy ISIS. Dr. Frankenstein was coming after one of the monsters he created; except in reality, he was not. The supposed US-led military campaign against the so-called Islamic State is, for all intents and purposes, a phony war. In a year of airstrikes, the US-led coalition conducted an average of some 15 airstrikes per day against an organization controlling a territory the size of Great Britain.²⁴

To put this number into perspective, during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the United States launched 1000 airstrikes a day against Iraq. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the American Air Force carried some 700 airstrikes a day. The air campaign against ISIS, which Obama promised would help eventually destroy the organization, was little more than a slap on the wrist. Consequently, in a year of American airstrikes, the terrorist group was able to increase the area it controls, conquering the Iraqi city of Ramadi (capital of Anbar province) and the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra. ISIS was so at ease in its areas of control that it began to mint coins, establish schools, and carry out a systematic destruction of ancient ruins in both Iraq and Syria. World heritage sites in Palmyra, Nimrod and Nineveh were razed; American satellites captured images of the destruction, but apparently failed to notice those who placed the bombs.

Looking for foot soldiers in Syria to join its campaign, the US opted to arm “moderate” Syrian opposition group for the purpose of fighting ISIS. For the Idleb offensive against the Syrian government, the United States and its allies were able to group and equip 50,000 fighters (mostly Jihadis), but when it came to fighting terrorism, the US training program drew in a whopping 50 “moderates.” The fifty men enjoyed a lavish training program paid for with half a billion dollars of American taxpayers’ money. But when they entered Syria, al-Qaeda’s Nusra front took away their American-supplied weapons and threw them in prison.²⁵ The US eventually cancelled the program, but the farce did not end there. ²⁶ The Obama administration decided to airdrop 50 tons of weapons directly into the hands of the “moderates,” now calling themselves the “Syrian Democratic Forces.” ²⁷ How many shipments would follow and in whose hands they would end up? No one knows.

If the United States and its allies are not out to destroy ISIS, what is their real objective then? I would not like to delve into much speculation, but one cannot ignore facts on the ground. Since the US-led coalition began its campaign, ISIS has expanded. The terrorist group is attracting more foreign recruits, as the Turkish border with Syria remains wide open. In Mount Sinjar in Iraq, the United States did not allow Kurdish Peshmerga forces, in control of commanding heights, to target the road linking ISIS-controlled cities of Mosul and Raqqa. On 12 November 2015, the United States reversed its decision and in one day the Kurdish Peshmerga replaced ISIS in the Sinjar province. But where did the men of ISIS go? My conjuncture is that they shaved their beards and changed their uniforms, and joined the so-called “Syrian Democratic Forces” which the US has created not to fight ISIS, but in order to fight the Syrian Army and help the Kurds to establish an autonomous entity in the north of Syria as a prelude to partitioning the country, as they are also trying to partition Iraq.

Other terrorist groups such as al-Nusra and Jaysh al-Fatah also continue to expand, with support from the US and its allies. Is this failure the result of flawed policies? Does the United States and its allies badly misunderstand the region? Or is there a deliberate course of action to achieve certain geopolitical gains, and perhaps redraw the maps of both Iraq and Syria? In either case, the Syrian people and their government are the ones facing the mortal threat of the so-called Islamic State and the host of other terror organization. While American and other Western decision-makers could afford the luxury of trial and error from the comfort of their offices halfway around the earth, Syrians have paid a high price in both their blood and their livelihood standing up courageously against global terrorism. Decisive action should have been taken, if anybody wanted a way out for Syria, but it was not by the west.

In his speech before the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2015, Russia's President Vladimir Putin criticized the export of the so-called 'democratic' revolutions, which unleashed poverty and violence instead of the triumph of democracy, especially in the Middle East. He cited the examples of Iraq and Libya, where the United States changed political regimes by force in defiance of international laws and norms creating power vacuums, which in turn led to the emergence of lawless areas that immediately started to be filled with extremists and terrorists. "We think it is an enormous mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian government and its armed forces who are valiantly fighting terrorism face to face...we should finally acknowledge that no one but President Assad's armed forces and Kurdish militia are truly fighting Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Syria," said Putin. The Russian President then proposed the joining of efforts and the creation of a broad international coalition against terrorism. He also proposed discussions at the UN Security Council about a resolution aimed at coordinating forces to confront ISIS and other terrorist organizations, based on the principles of the UN Charter.

Putin's speech reflected Russia's ample understanding of the situation in Syria since 2011, which stems largely from the continuous strategic dialogue between Damascus and Moscow. This dialogue goes back decades, and has intensified dramatically during the Syrian crisis. Since 2014, Russia has been providing technical military assistance to Iraq, Syria and other states in the region, with the goal of combating extremism and ISIS. Politically, Russia has worked tirelessly to establish a broad regional and international coalition against terrorism, months before Putin's speech at the UN. Upon meeting President Putin in Moscow in June 2015, Syria's foreign minister Mr. Walid Moualem and myself welcomed Russia's efforts in trying to establish such a coalition. However, Syria seriously doubted that the United States and its allies, especially Turkey and Saudi Arabia would be forthcoming. Our estimate was accurate; the United States and its allies responded negatively to all initiatives, leaving Russia no alternative but to act decisively against the terrorist threat endangering Syria, the West Asia region and Russia itself, if not the entire world.

So, on 30 September, upon a request from the Syrian government, the Russian air force began conducting airstrikes against the different terrorist groups operating on Syrian soil. At the moment of writing, the strikes are ongoing, coupled with a massive ground offensive by the Syrian Army on many fronts to weed out the terrorists and liberate Syrian cities and villages.

The performance of the Russians in Syria has embarrassed the United States. The Russians presented the Americans with satellite pictures showing ISIS terrorists moving for miles on the roads to Palmyra, while US satellites observed, with no action whatsoever taken against them by the American-led coalition.

The Russians also presented the United States with other satellite pictures showing ISIS terrorists moving oil from north of Syria to Sinjar in Iraq where the oil is sold through Iraqi Kurdistan in exchange for weapons and ammunition that go back to Syria. All this happens along a road in the midst of a desert, which makes them an easy target for American airstrikes had there been a will to do that. On the other hand, after only two months into the Russian airstrikes in Syria, the Syrian Army had been enabled to liberate large areas from ISIS and al-Nusra Front. As a result

the Russians are gaining credibility in Syria and the Arab World at large, while the Americans and the West no longer enjoy the trust of the Arab people.

Saudi Wahhabism: The ideological bedrock of modern terrorism

The recent resurgence of terrorist groups in West Asia has much to do with geopolitical machinations discussed above, as it does with centuries-old extremist ideologies espoused by Gulf countries, most importantly the ruling Wahhabi regime in Saudi Arabia. Thanks to Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism has survived much longer than its original authors and engineers. For the past 80-years, the works of Abdul Wahhab and Ibn Taymiya, both ideologues of extremism, have been taught extensively in Saudi educational institutions. Abdul Wahhab's classic book, "*Al-Tawhid*" (Monotheism) is compulsory at all state-run schools. Their thoughts and writings have had a profound influence on consecutive generations of Saudis, and all Muslims who have lived and worked in Saudi Arabia since the 1970s.

Although extremely critical of the House of Saud, Osama Bin Laden, himself a Saudi citizen, was also influenced by the teachings of Ibn Taymiya. Spreading the faith by the sword, killing infidels and purifying the Islamic world from foreign ideas and lifestyles is the crux of Wahhabism and forms the cornerstone of jihadi thought and doctrine. It is the ideological blueprint for all the jihadist movements that have dominated world affairs within the last generation, namely, al-Qaeda, al-Nusra Front and ISIS. Contemporary jihadis are the intellectual product of a school of thought founded in the Arabian Desert back in 1744. This school thrives in the psyche of Saudi officialdom and in the books of Saudi theorists. Without Wahhabism, there would be no Saudi Arabia, and no talk of al-Qaeda or ISIS. Oil-rich Saudi Arabia has been marketing its own vision of Islam for years.

Under the rule of King Fahd, for example, Saudi Arabia bankrolled 210 Islamic centers around the world, along with 1500 mosques, 202 Islamic faculties and 2000 schools. All of them, from Nigeria to India, were packed with Wahhabi scholars and books. Saudi teaching and influence has spread far and wide, reaching deep into Bosnia, Chechnya, London, Canada and the United States. In 2013, the Saudis allocated \$35 billion for schools in South Asia (including India) where one billion of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims live. With Wahhabi views deeply imprinted in their minds and hearts, an estimated 35-40,000 Saudis went to jihad in Afghanistan in the late 1980s.

According to a cable revealed on Wikileaks, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote in December 2009, "Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaeda...and other terrorist groups."²⁸ Saudi donors were the "most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide" she added. Yet this did not stop the West from using Wahhabi-fuelled extremism in Syria to force regime-change and destabilization. Today, the Saudi regime shows no signs of change, or even cosmetic reforms, as it continues to spread the poisonous ideology of Wahhabism around the world, especially in Muslim countries or in countries with significant Muslim populations such as India. Not only should Asian powers, China and India above all, work to secure gas and oil supplies to fuel their economic growth; they must also pay attention to where their money is being put to use. Because these petrodollars might very well be financing

the mosques and schools that threaten India's social cohesion, in a manner not dissimilar to what happened in Syria.

Conclusion: Syria, a gateway to Asia

By deliberately supporting terrorists in Syria under the banner of changing the regime (which is against international laws), Western countries have aided Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in what in reality is an all-out war against Syria in an effort to destroy the country and eliminate the role it has been playing in the region and the world since time immemorial. Syria today is a Gordian knot, and its unraveling threatens the whole of Asia. As this paper has tried to show, what happened in Syria was a grand geopolitical game under the guise of a movement for democracy (i.e. the Arab Spring). Little attention is paid to Libya nowadays; the country has sunk into chaos even though NATO intervened less than a fortnight after the "armed rebellion" began.

Today, ISIS is devouring Libya piece by piece, and Sarkozy's and Cameron's promise to build a democracy there proved to be hollow. The use of religious fanaticism, media complacency, and terrorist groups to overthrow the legitimate government of Syria in order to achieve geopolitical gains is an operational model that might very well be repeated anywhere else. The West, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are the main culprits. Russia, China, Iran, and the BRICS have stood up to this attempt in various forms; starting with the double veto up to the Russian campaign against terrorism in Syria. Yet the Syrian model could be repeated anywhere in Asia, whenever Western interests might find it useful. Beyond geopolitical machinations, India and other Asian countries should pay heed to the poisonous ideologies espoused by Gulf countries. Wahhabi penetration of diverse societies, sowing hatred and extremism is enabled by their vast wealth; hydrocarbon sources today are their main funder of terrorism in the world. India and China should be more involved in West Asia, not only to secure energy sources, but to make sure that those sources do not become a weapon to destroy Asian societies from within through extremism and terrorism.

Notes.

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