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How the War on Terror Created the World's Most Powerful Terror Group

From the hours immediately after 9/11 to the present, Washington's policies in the Middle East have created the conditions for more—not less—jihadist terror.

Patrick Cockburn
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A member of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant waves a flag in the Syrian city of Raqqa.
June 29, 2014.

There are extraordinary elements in the present US policy in Iraq and Syria that are attracting surprisingly little attention. In Iraq, the United States is carrying out air strikes and sending in advisers and trainers to help beat back the advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (better known as ISIS) on the Kurdish capital, Erbil. The US would presumably do the same if ISIS surrounds or attacks Baghdad. But in Syria, Washington's policy is the exact opposite: there the main opponent of ISIS is the Syrian government and the Syrian Kurds in their northern enclaves. Both are under attack from ISIS, which has taken about a third of the country, including most of its oil and gas production facilities.

But US, Western European, Saudi and Arab Gulf policy is to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad, which happens to be the policy of ISIS and other jihadist in Syria. If Assad goes, then ISIS will be the beneficiary, since it is either defeating or absorbing the rest of the Syrian armed opposition. There is a pretense in Washington and elsewhere that there exists a "moderate" Syrian opposition being helped by the United States, Qatar, Turkey, and the Saudis. It is, however, weak and getting more so by the day. Soon the new caliphate may stretch from the Iranian border to the Mediterranean and the only force that can possibly stop this from happening is the Syrian army.

The reality of US policy is to support the government of Iraq, but not Syria, against ISIS. But one reason that group has been able to grow so strong in Iraq is that it can draw on its resources and fighters in Syria. Not everything that went wrong in Iraq was the fault of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, as has now become the political and media consensus in the West. Iraqi politicians have been telling me for the last two years that foreign backing for the Sunni revolt in Syria would inevitably destabilize their country as well. This has now happened.

By continuing these contradictory policies in two countries, the United States has ensured that ISIS can reinforce its fighters in Iraq from Syria and vice versa. So far, Washington has been successful in escaping blame for the rise of ISIS by putting all the blame on the Iraqi government. In fact, it has created a situation in which ISIS can survive and may well flourish.

Using the Al Qaeda Label

The sharp increase in the strength and reach of jihadist organizations in Syria and Iraq has generally been unacknowledged until recently by politicians and media in the West. A primary reason for this is that Western governments and their security forces narrowly define the jihadist threat as those forces directly controlled by Al Qaeda central or "core" Al Qaeda. This enables them to present a much more cheerful picture of their successes in the so-called war on terror than the situation on the ground warrants.

In fact, the idea that the only jihadis to be worried about are those with the official blessing of Al Qaeda is naïve and self-deceiving. It ignores the fact, for instance, that ISIS has been criticized by the Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri for its excessive violence and sectarianism. After talking to a range of Syrian jihadi rebels not directly affiliated with Al Qaeda in southeast Turkey earlier this year, a source told me that "without exception they all expressed enthusiasm for the 9/11 attacks and hoped the same thing would happen in Europe as well as the US."

Jihadi groups ideologically close to Al Qaeda have been relabeled as moderate if their actions are deemed supportive of US policy aims. In Syria, the Americans backed a plan by Saudi Arabia to build up a “Southern Front” based in Jordan that would be hostile to the Assad government in Damascus, and simultaneously hostile to Al Qaeda–type rebels in the north and east. The powerful but supposedly moderate Yarmouk Brigade, reportedly the planned recipient of anti-aircraft missiles from Saudi Arabia, was intended to be the leading element in this new formation. But numerous videos show that the Yarmouk Brigade has frequently fought in collaboration with JAN, the official Al Qaeda affiliate. Since it was likely that, in the midst of battle, these two groups would share their munitions, Washington was effectively allowing advanced weaponry to be handed over to its deadliest enemy. Iraqi officials confirm that they have captured sophisticated arms from ISIS fighters in Iraq that were originally supplied by outside powers to forces considered to be anti–Al Qaeda in Syria.

The name Al Qaeda has always been applied flexibly when identifying an enemy. In 2003 and 2004 in Iraq, as armed Iraqi opposition to the American and British-led occupation mounted, US officials attributed most attacks to Al Qaeda, though many were carried out by nationalist and Baathist groups. Propaganda like this helped to persuade nearly 60 percent of US voters prior to the Iraq invasion that there was a connection between Saddam Hussein and those responsible for 9/11, despite the absence of any evidence for this. In Iraq itself, indeed throughout the entire Muslim world, these accusations have benefited Al Qaeda by exaggerating its role in the resistance to the US and British occupation.

Precisely the opposite PR tactics were employed by Western governments in 2011 in Libya, where any similarity between Al Qaeda and the NATO-backed rebels fighting to overthrow the Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi was played down. Only those jihadis who had a direct operational link to the Al Qaeda “core” of Osama bin Laden were deemed to be dangerous. The falsity of the pretense that the anti-Gaddafi jihadis in Libya were less threatening than those in direct contact with Al Qaeda was forcefully, if tragically, exposed when US ambassador Chris Stevens was killed by jihadi fighters in Benghazi in September 2012. These were the same fighters lauded by Western governments and media for their role in the anti-Gaddafi uprising.

Imagining Al Qaeda as the Mafia

Al Qaeda is an idea rather than an organization, and this has long been the case. For a five-year period after 1996, it did have cadres, resources and camps in Afghanistan, but these were eliminated after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. Subsequently, Al Qaeda’s name became primarily a rallying cry, a set of Islamic beliefs, centering on the creation of an Islamic state, the imposition of sharia, a return to Islamic customs, the subjugation of women and the waging of holy war against other Muslims, notably the Shia, who are considered heretics worthy of death. At the center of this doctrine for making war is an emphasis on self-sacrifice and martyrdom as a symbol of religious faith and commitment. This has resulted in using untrained but fanatical believers as suicide bombers, to devastating effect.

It has always been in the interest of the US and other governments that Al Qaeda be viewed as having a command-and-control structure like a mini-Pentagon, or like the mafia in America. This is a comforting image for the public because organized groups, however demonic, can be tracked

down and eliminated through imprisonment or death. More alarming is the reality of a movement whose adherents are self-recruited and can spring up anywhere.

Osama bin Laden's gathering of militants, which he did not call Al Qaeda until after 9/11, was just one of many jihadi groups twelve years ago. But today its ideas and methods are predominant among jihadis because of the prestige and publicity it gained through the destruction of the Twin Towers, the war in Iraq and its demonization by Washington as the source of all anti-American evil. These days, there is a narrowing of differences in the beliefs of jihadis, regardless of whether or not they are formally linked to Al Qaeda central.

Unsurprisingly, governments prefer the fantasy picture of Al Qaeda because it enables them to claim victories when it succeeds in killing its better known members and allies. Often, those eliminated are given quasi-military ranks, such as "head of operations," to enhance the significance of their demise. The culmination of this heavily publicized but largely irrelevant aspect of the "war on terror" was the killing of bin Laden in Abbottabad in Pakistan in 2011. This enabled President Obama to grandstand before the American public as the man who had presided over the hunting down of Al Qaeda's leader. In practical terms, however, his death had little impact on Al Qaeda-type jihadi groups, whose greatest expansion has occurred subsequently.

Ignoring the Roles of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan

The key decisions that enabled Al Qaeda to survive, and later to expand, were made in the hours immediately after 9/11. Almost every significant element in the project to crash planes into the Twin Towers and other iconic American buildings led back to Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden was a member of the Saudi elite, and his father had been a close associate of the Saudi monarch. Citing a CIA report from 2002, the official 9/11 report says that Al Qaeda relied for its financing on "a variety of donors and fundraisers, primarily in the Gulf countries and particularly in Saudi Arabia."

The report's investigators repeatedly found their access limited or denied when seeking information in Saudi Arabia. Yet President George W. Bush apparently never even considered holding the Saudis responsible for what happened. An exit of senior Saudis, including bin Laden relatives, from the United States was facilitated by the US government in the days after 9/11. Most significant, twenty-eight pages of the 9/11 Commission Report about the relationship between the attackers and Saudi Arabia were cut and never published, despite a promise by President Obama to do so, on the grounds of national security.

In 2009, eight years after 9/11, a cable from the US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, revealed by WikiLeaks, complained that donors in Saudi Arabia constituted the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide. But despite this private admission, the United States and Western Europeans continued to remain indifferent to Saudi preachers whose message, spread to millions by satellite TV, YouTube and Twitter, called for the killing of the Shia as heretics. These calls came as Al Qaeda bombs were slaughtering people in Shia neighborhoods in Iraq. A sub-headline in another State Department cable in the same year reads: "Saudi Arabia: Anti-Shi'ism as Foreign Policy?" Now, five years later, Saudi-supported groups have a record of extreme sectarianism against non-Sunni Muslims.

Pakistan, or rather Pakistani military intelligence in the shape of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), was the other parent of Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and jihadi movements in general. When the Taliban was disintegrating under the weight of US bombing in 2001, its forces in northern Afghanistan were trapped by anti-Taliban forces. Before they surrendered, hundreds of ISI members, military trainers and advisers were hastily evacuated by air. Despite the clearest evidence of ISI's sponsorship of the Taliban and jihadis in general, Washington refused to confront Pakistan, and thereby opened the way for the resurgence of the Taliban after 2003, which neither the US nor NATO has been able to reverse.

The “war on terror” has failed because it did not target the jihadi movement as a whole and, above all, was not aimed at Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the two countries that fostered jihadism as a creed and a movement. The United States did not do so because these countries were important American allies whom it did not want to offend. Saudi Arabia is an enormous market for American arms, and the Saudis have cultivated, and on occasion purchased, influential members of the American political establishment. Pakistan is a nuclear power with a population of 180 million and a military with close links to the Pentagon.

The spectacular resurgence of Al Qaeda and its offshoots has happened despite the huge expansion of American and British intelligence services and their budgets after 9/11. Since then, the United States, closely followed by Britain, has fought wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and adopted procedures normally associated with police states, such as imprisonment without trial, rendition, torture and domestic espionage. Governments wage the “war on terror” claiming that the rights of individual citizens must be sacrificed to secure the safety of all.

In the face of these controversial security measures, the movements against which they are aimed have not been defeated but rather have grown stronger. At the time of 9/11, Al Qaeda was a small, generally ineffectual organization; by 2014 Al Qaeda-type groups were numerous and powerful.

In other words, the “war on terror,” the waging of which has shaped the political landscape for so much of the world since 2001, has demonstrably failed. Until the fall of Mosul, nobody paid much attention.