

“Fake Counter-terrorism”: As ISIS Advanced in Syria and Iraq, the US Did Nothing to Stop Them

Collusion with terror: For 18 months, until the Russian Air Force entered Syrian skies, the US did absolutely nothing to stop ISIS from taking over swathes of Syria and Iraq

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In 2017, US and allied Kurdish forces bombarded the city of Raqqa, the bastion of ISIS in Syria and the de-facto capital of the terror group’s self-proclaimed caliphate.

Concurrent to this, US forces conducted massive air strikes on the Iraqi city of Mosul, to support Iraqi and Kurdish ground forces against ISIS there too.

But the US-led campaigns in Mosul and Raqqa falsely suggest that the US and ISIS were implacable enemies. These battles created the perception that the US was committed to fighting Al-Qaeda and its various splinter groups, in a continuation of the so-called “War on Terror” begun by the Bush administration in the wake of 9/11.

Supporting ISIS’ territorial advances

However, a closer look at events in both Iraq and Syria paints a very different picture: The US and its allies, both directly and indirectly, colluded with ISIS to attain specific geopolitical objectives. The terror group that captured the world’s attention in 2014 was in fact a vital and valuable tool for US policy planners.

Evidence of this is rife. In June 2014, when ISIS fighters swept across the Syrian border to first capture Mosul, the largest city of its caliphate, the US military monitored the ISIS convoys crossing from Syria using drones and satellite systems, but took no action to bomb them.

Earlier, in an October 2013 visit to the White House, then-Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had [warned](#) Obama administration officials that, “The weapons provided to those killers in Syria have been smuggled to Iraq, and those wolves that came from different countries to

Syria are now sneaking into Iraq.”

Maliki’s warnings were spot on. He took his case to Washington because it was clear – even then – that weapons the US and its allies were the pumping into Syria were being passed from so-called “moderate rebels” to Al Qaeda and other extremist militants.

Then-Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Brett McGurk, who worried about a possible ISIS advance even on Baghdad at the time, [described](#) fellow US officials *advocating the policy of allowing ISIS to take Mosul as “completely out of their minds.”*

Two months later, ISIS fighters coming from Syria in the west, and Mosul in the east, assaulted the Sinjar region of Iraq, home to the Yazidi religious minority. Within the course of a few days, ISIS fighters [massacred](#) thousands of Yazidi men and boys, while enslaving some 7,000 Yazidi women and children.

The US looks the other way

At the time, US President Barack Obama claimed he would act to [avert](#) a “potential act of genocide” against the Yazidis, but then turned a blind eye to the ensuing ethnic cleansing.

Although the US president [approved](#) limited air strikes to reverse ISIS’ advance on Erbil – the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq (where US oil companies and diplomats were based) – Obama simultaneously [refused](#) to bomb ISIS militants to prevent the massacre of Yazidis in the village of Kocho, despite desperate pleas from US-based Yazidi activists to do so.

In yet another example of blatant US military inaction, on 20 May, 2015, ISIS conquered the Syrian city of Tadmur at the site of ancient Palmyra, famous for its Roman ruins, thereby paving the way for the terrorist organization to push closer to Damascus.

Once again, US military planners had ample opportunity to bomb ISIS convoys advancing across the open desert from Raqqa on route to assault the UNESCO World Heritage Site, but chose to watch instead.

The following year, the LA Times [reported](#) that:

“As Islamic State [ISIS] closed in on Palmyra, the U.S.-led aerial coalition that has been pummeling Islamic State in Syria for the past 18 months took no action to prevent the extremists’ advance toward the historic town — which, until then, had remained in the hands of the sorely overstretched Syrian security forces. The U.S. approach in Palmyra contrasted dramatically with the very proactive U.S. bombardment of Kobani during 2014-15 on behalf of U.S.-allied Kurdish militias fending off a furious Islamic State offensive.”

How can these contradictions be explained? Why did US planners allow ISIS to grow and expand in Mosul, Sinjar, and Palmyra *for 18 months* between 2014 and 2015, only to conduct two brutal military campaigns, causing massive civilian suffering, to defeat the terror group in Raqqa and Mosul in 2017? In the fight against ISIS, whose side was the US really on?

Backing terrorists to regime-change Syria

The answer lies partly in US policy toward the Syrian government of President Bashar Al-Assad. Washington initially wished to use ISIS as leverage to oust Assad from power, as part of a broader effort at regime change that had started long before. Once ISIS was no longer useful to this end, US planners turned against the group, as has been the norm whenever US assets pass their expiry date.

To accomplish this regime-change, the US and its allies [partnered](#) with Jihadi-Salafis, including from Al-Qaeda in Iraq, to launch a dirty war on the Syrian state in 2011, attacking Syrian police, soldiers and security forces under the cover of the anti-government protests that initially appeared to be part of broader region-wide Arab uprisings.

The early anti-government protests in Syria, including the first protests in Deraa in March 2011, were also [orchestrated](#) by US planners, with assistance from activists of both liberal and Islamist orientation, including from the Muslim Brotherhood and the Sarouri trend.

With the help of allied intelligence agencies in the region, the US pumped billions of dollars of weapons and aid to Salafist militant groups in Syria in subsequent years, hoping these militants could successfully topple the Assad government on the US and Israel's behalf.

Achieving this goal relied in part on establishing what US intelligence analysts [described](#) as a "Salafist principality" in the majority Sunni regions of eastern Syria (Raqqa and Deir Ezzor) and western Iraq (Mosul). Destroying the Baathist Syrian state by dividing the country along ethnic, religious and tribal lines had been a goal of US neoconservative planners since at least the 1990's.

After an intra-jihadi civil war, ISIS as an organization emerged as the most powerful faction in the broader US-backed Salafist insurgency, and in 2014 established the desired Salafist principality, or caliphate, with Raqqa and Mosul as its two main strongholds.

Funneling weapons to terrorists

Though US-backed Persian Gulf sheikhdoms supported ISIS directly, according to admissions from US Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey, Washington's support for the terror group, and its sister organization, the Nusra Front (Al-Qaeda's Syrian subsidiary), was indirect.

US support for ISIS (and Nusra) came in the form of money and weapons channeled through what was formally known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Weapons were then passed on to, or captured by, ISIS and Nusra. US planners simply had to flood the country with weapons, then turn a blind eye to where the weapons would certainly end up.

Though allegedly composed of deserters from the Syrian army fighting to establish a secular, democratic state, in fact the FSA never existed as a real army, but instead functioned largely as [brand](#) adopted by many of the Salafist militant groups fighting on the ground. The most capable of the Salafist militants fighting under the FSA banner would then graduate to fight for the more respected Jihadi groups, whether ISIS or Nusra.

Prominent FSA groups whose fighters eventually defected to ISIS in significant numbers include the [Farouq Brigades](#) in Homs, [Liwa al-Hajar al-Aswad](#) in Yarmouk camp, the [Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades](#), the [Military Council](#), the [Revolutionary Council](#), and [Liwa al-Sa'qa](#) in Deir al-Zour, and [Saqour al-Sham](#) in Idlib.

Fighters from these Salafist groups, and the western and Gulf weapons funneled to them through the FSA leadership, therefore formed the foundation upon which both ISIS and the Nusra Front were built, and which finally enabled ISIS to establish the Salafist principality in Iraq and Syria desired by US planners.

The FSA brand provided a secular facade to the Salafist and Al-Qaeda dominated insurgency, allowing US and allied countries to publicly justify providing military support to the insurgency, while feigning opposition to the Al-Qaeda groups.

Western media and think tank analysts [claimed](#) this military aid was going to help the “Syrian people” resist a dictator, even though the groups comprising the insurgency had little popular support, generally fought alongside and in support of the Al-Qaeda groups, and broadly terrorized most Syrians with their sectarian ideology and hatred of religious minorities.

Assisting ISIS in Syria

After conquering Mosul in June 2014, ISIS [crossed](#) back into Syria to conquer Deir Ezzor province, with the help of local FSA brigades.

[According](#) to Samer al-Ani, an opposition media activist from Deir Al-Zour, several fighting groups affiliated to the US-backed Military Council quietly assisted ISIS in the assault on the province. Al-Ani warned that “money being sent through members of the [US-backed] National Coalition to rebels in Deir Ezzor risks going to ISIS,” and that “these groups pledged loyalty to ISIS four months ago, so this was not forced as a result of ISIS’s latest push, as happened elsewhere. Such collaboration was key to the takeover of Deir Ezzor in recent weeks, especially in areas where ISIS could not defeat the local forces so easily.”

Assistance from local FSA factions allowed ISIS to quickly capture a string of strategic towns and cities along the Euphrates River, including Al-Bukamal on the Iraqi border, followed by Al-Shuhayl (known as Nusra’s capital), Al-Mayadeen, and much of Deir Ezzor city itself. This allowed ISIS to expel Nusra from the province.

ISIS relied on FSA factions not only for manpower but also for weapons. *Newsweek* [reports](#) that according to a report by UK-based Conflict Armament Research, ISIS obtained much of their “arsenal as a result of former President Barack Obama’s support for rebels in Syria,” and that these weapons “included a powerful anti-tank missile launcher bought from a Bulgarian manufacturer by the U.S. Army and wielded by ISIS only weeks later.”

Al-Jazeera reported in July 2013 that [according](#) to the ISIS commander for Aleppo province at the time, Abu Atheer, “we are buying weapons from the FSA. we bought 200 anti-aircraft missiles and Konkourse anti-tank weapons. We have good relations with our brothers in the FSA.”

Konkurs missiles were provided to FSA groups via the CIA’s regional allies, while the US intelligence agency trained FSA fighters in the use of these weapons in Jordan and Turkey starting in November 2012. When [asked](#) about the CIA training, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney simply said, “We have stepped up our assistance, but I cannot inventory for you all the elements of that assistance,” and that “We have provided and will continue to provide substantial assistance to the Syrian opposition, as well as the Supreme Military Council.”

ISIS was able to acquire US and Gulf supplied weapons so quickly because, in many instances, FSA commanders had secretly pledged allegiance to ISIS. Such FSA commanders were therefore able to deliver weapons from the US-backed Supreme Military Council (SMC) to ISIS almost immediately upon receiving them.

Syrian oppositionist news website Deir Ezzor 24 [notes](#) for example that FSA commander Abu Seif Al-Shaiti of Ahfad Al-Rasoul attended a meeting in Turkey with western and Gulf intelligence officials where he pledged to fight ISIS in exchange for a large shipment of new weapons.

ISIS then put him on a wanted list as a result. Instead of fighting ISIS, Abu Seif simply pledged allegiance to the organization and delivered all the weapons to the ISIS leadership that he had received from his former western and Gulf sponsors.

US policy makers were aware of this phenomenon, but chose to look the other way, suggesting they were satisfied that their weapons were ending up with jihadists, be they Nusra or ISIS.

In 2015, *The Cradle* columnist Sharmine Narwani asked US Central Command spokesman Lieutenant Commander Kyle Raines about why Pentagon-vetted fighters' weapons were showing up in Nusra's hands. Raines [responded](#): "We don't 'command and control' these forces—we only 'train and enable' them. Who they say they're allying with, that's their business."

A full year after Obama [declared](#) the US military would "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS, the organization was at the height of its power, controlling some [50 percent](#) of Syrian territory, including the strategically important Yarmouk refugee camp at the door step of Damascus.

Patrick Coburn of the *Independent* [reported](#) in September 2015 that "the majority of the 17 million Syrians still in the country live in government-controlled areas now threatened by ISIS. These people are terrified of ISIS occupying their cities, towns and villages because of its reputation for mass executions, ritual mutilation and rape against those not obedient to its extreme variant of Sunni Islam."

Russian airpower obstructs US plans

In the fall of 2015, both ISIS (from its strongholds in Deir Al-Zour and Raqqa) and Nusra (in Idlib and Aleppo) were threatening to conquer Damascus and raise their respective black flags over virtually the entire country.

At this critical juncture, the Syrian government formally requested intervention from Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to help thwart ISIS' significant advances by directing Russia's Air Force to strike the terror group's capabilities and manpower.

Despite accelerated CIA shipments of TOW missiles to the FSA and Nusra, it quickly became clear that the tide of the war would soon turn as a result of Russian airpower. The Russian bombing campaign targeted the Salafist insurgency broadly, including ISIS, enabling the Syrian army and allied Iranian-backed ground forces to make crucial gains.

Had Washington been serious about fighting ISIS, US warplanes would have unleashed a massive bombing campaign against ISIS in 2014 and 2015, as the danger of Damascus

falling, and the possible massacre of large numbers of its inhabitants, both religious minorities and Sunnis who supported the government, was very real.

Instead, despite the terror felt by millions of Syrians, US planners showed their real intentions by viewing the brutal ISIS advance toward Damascus with approval. In a private meeting with members of the Syrian opposition, Secretary of State John Kerry [acknowledged](#) that the US had welcomed the 2015 ISIS advance on Damascus, to use it as leverage to force Assad step down from power.

As Kerry explained, “that is why Russia came in. They didn’t want a Daesh [ISIS] government and they supported Assad. And we know this was growing. We were watching. We saw that Daesh [ISIS] was growing in strength. And we thought Assad was threatened. We thought we could manage that Assad might then negotiate. Instead of negotiating, he got Putin to support him.”

US policy pivots

Shortly after the announcement of the September 2015 Russian intervention, US planners realized that any effort to topple the Syrian government via their jihadi proxies would now likely fail. The leverage that the ISIS threat gave US planners against the Syrian government would soon dissipate due to Russian bombs. Washington had few options left and quickly pivoted, abandoning their ISIS card.

The US bombing campaign which was previously limited to blocking any ISIS advance only in Kurdish areas, now intensified and transformed into a concerted effort to defeat ISIS militarily.

The US began to heavily invest in their budding partnership with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) to give the US new boots on the ground in the conflict. Rebranded by the Pentagon as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), these US-backed Kurdish forces agreed to participate in Washington’s campaign to conquer as much territory (then under ISIS control) as possible, before Russian and Syrian forces were able to do so.

This arguably created a “race to Berlin” dynamic resembling the competition between Allied and Soviet forces to conquer Germany from the Nazis in the Second World War.

While initiating the campaign to defeat ISIS in Raqqa, the US still welcomed any progress the terror group might make against the Syrian government.

As an example, when Russian and Syrian forces were able to retake Palmyra and liberate it from ISIS in March 2016, the *LA Times* [noted](#) this of White House officials:

“[They have] difficulty publicly lauding advances against Islamic State by Assad and his allies, including the Russians and Iranians, after years of calling for Assad’s fall” and that the Russian success in combating ISIS created a “dilemma” for US planners, because “Washington has endeavored to portray the battle against Islamic State as a project of the United States and its allies, while accusing Moscow of attacking ‘moderate’ rebels instead of the extremists. Palmyra seems to embody an alternative narrative.”

US dissatisfaction at the defeat of ISIS in Palmyra was also expressed by State Department spokesperson Mark Toner at a press briefing in March 2016, when Toner [refused](#) “to laud”

the Syrian and Russian effort to liberate the city.

With ISIS in decline, the US decided instead to take over large swathes of northeastern Syria from the terror group, including the country's major energy and grain producing regions, to provide Washington with new leverage against Damascus, which desperately needed these resources to successfully govern and rebuild the country once the war ended.

US control of these crucial areas would also exacerbate and help maintain the already existing and crushing US economic sanctions on Syria, in the hope of impoverishing Syrians to spur them to turn against the Assad government.

Conquest masked as liberation

US and Kurdish forces ultimately succeeded in capturing Raqqa from ISIS in October 2017 while effectively destroying the city and killing large numbers of civilians in one of the most vicious military assaults in recent memory.

The US military-funded think tank, the Rand Corporation, [noted](#) the “shocking level of destruction” caused by the US-SDF assault on Raqqa. As a result, in only four months of fighting, “Raqqa endured the most structural damage by density of any city in Syria,” while “60 to 80 percent of it was estimated to be uninhabitable.”

According to the Rand researchers, “the battle for Raqqa is a cautionary tale about civilian harm in 21st-century conflicts.” Much of the death and destruction resulted from the decision to encircle the city, which prevented the creation of civilian exit corridors, followed by airstrikes and artillery bombardment of heavily populated urban areas, effectively burying civilians in the basements of their destroyed homes.

When a ceasefire was finally reached, causing civilians to think they would be evacuated in bus convoys, US planners *allowed the remaining ISIS militants to be evacuated instead*, after any benefit to civilians by allowing the ISIS fighters to escape had largely already been lost.

The [BBC reported](#) on a “secret deal that let hundreds of IS [ISIS] fighters and their families escape from Raqqa, under the gaze of the US and British-led coalition and Kurdish-led forces who control the city,” and which included some of ISIS’ “most notorious members.” Presumably, this would allow US planners to resurrect the ISIS card if needed in the future.

US and Kurdish forces then pushed to the eastern side of the Euphrates River, blocking the advance of the Syrian army, which had successfully defeated ISIS with Russian help in Deir Ezzor and reached as far as the western side of the river.

US and Kurdish forces continue to occupy Raqqa and northeast Syria at the time of this writing in 2022. The US military presence on Syria's eastern borders also replaces ISIS' role to impede Iraqi-Syrian relations, and importantly, to impede an [Iranian land route](#) all the way to the borders of occupied Palestine.

ISIS's invasion and occupation of key swathes of territory across northern Syria and Iraq served to [delineate the borders](#) of areas Washington seeks to control. The US then championed its Kurdish allies to “liberate” those territories.

“This is conquest masquerading as liberation,” writes Assyrian writer [Max Joseph](#).

The US military presence also allows Washington to directly control Syria's strategically important agriculture, oil, and electricity producing regions previously under ISIS control. In this way, the Syrian government is still denied crucial access to the resources needed to rebuild the country and feed its population in the face of crippling US-imposed economic sanctions.

And the US plunders those resources liberally, in broad daylight. In August, the Syrian oil ministry reported that the US and its Kurdish foot soldiers "steal up to 66,000 barrels every single day from the fields occupied in the eastern region," accounting for [83 percent](#) of the country's daily production.

Pressure from Washington against the Syrian government has therefore been maintained, with the Kurdish-led SDF now fulfilling ISIS' previous role in implementing US foreign policy in West Asia.

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[America's "War on Terrorism"](#)

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September 11, 2001 provides a justification for waging a war without borders. Washington’s agenda consists in extending the frontiers of the American Empire to facilitate complete U.S. corporate control, while installing within America the institutions of the Homeland Security State.

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