

ISIS Murders Another US Journalist, Steven Sotloff. Pretext for Another Full-scale War of Aggression in the Middle East?

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A repugnant video released by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), purporting to show the beheading of an American journalist, Steven Sotloff, has already been seized upon by Washington and its allies to justify further intensifying the military intervention in Iraq, with Syria the likely next target.

Sotloff's barbaric murder was the second by ISIS of a freelance US journalist in as many weeks, following that of James Foley. It was accompanied by a threat to kill a British hostage, David Haines.

The footage shows Sotloff, 31, who was kidnapped in northern Syria just over a year ago, dressed in orange and on his knees in a desert landscape. As in the previous video of Foley, this one then shows Sotloff's severed head resting on his corpse.

The young man, originally from Florida, had worked for several publications, including *Time*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *World Affairs Journal* and *Foreign Policy*, reporting from many parts of the Middle East, including Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, and finally Syria. Former colleagues, associates and editors paid tribute to his courage and dedication.

Sotloff's family yesterday said they were aware of the video, which was yet to be verified by the US administration, and were grieving privately. He was executed despite a televised plea a week ago from his mother, Shirley, to the ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to spare his life.

The family had known of Sotloff's capture for a year, as had the US government, but his plight was not made public until he was shown on the video of Foley's murder. A masked killer threatened his life in the event of further US airstrikes against ISIS.

As with Foley's beheading, ISIS justified the heinous act as retaliation for the US bombing campaign in Iraq, referring this time specifically to the air strikes around the Mosul Dam and the northern Iraqi town of Amerli, previously under siege by ISIS. Over the past month, the US has conducted more than 120 bombing raids in Iraq.

On the video, Sotloff's executioner declares: "I'm back, Obama, and I'm back because of your arrogant foreign policy towards the Islamic State... So just as your missiles continue to strike our people, our knife will continue to strike the necks of your people."

To murder individual journalists for the ongoing crimes being committed by their country's government—which are opposed by millions of Americans—underscores the reactionary outlook of ISIS and other Al Qaeda-linked groups.

These atrocious killings, together with those of captured Syrian soldiers, have nothing to do with the aspirations of the oppressed masses of the Middle East for liberation from imperialist violence and domination. ISIS represents the interests of disaffected sections of the Arab and Muslim elites, who seek to exploit the predatory drive of the US for hegemony over the energy-rich region, and whip up sectarian divisions, for their own capitalist agenda.

In turn, this barbarity is being seized upon by the Western ruling elites and their media outlets to overcome the broad hostility of their populations to the launching of a renewed war in the Middle East.

Even before the video of Sotloff's beheading was verified, the American media and political establishment ratcheted up the drumbeat of demands for the Obama administration to escalate its military campaign and extend it into Syria. Referring to Obama's comment last week that his administration did not yet have a "strategy" for Syria, CNN's Christiane Amanpour said Sotloff's killing would heighten pressure on Obama to devise a strategy to combat ISIS.

Senator Bill Nelson, a Florida Democrat and member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he would introduce a bill giving Obama authority to order air strikes in Syria. Representative Ed Royce, a California Republican and chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, called for more aggressive action against ISIS. "Working with key allies, the United States needs to be acting urgently to arm the Kurds on the ground who are fighting them, and targeting ISIS from the air with drone strikes," he said.

There was no immediate response from Obama, who was about to leave for a weeklong trip to Europe and a NATO summit meeting, focussed on the escalating confrontation with Russia over Ukraine.

British Prime Minister David Cameron said the video depicted an "absolutely disgusting, despicable act." Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said the killing "demonstrates that we are dealing with pure evil" and "abundantly justifies what Australia and other countries are doing to assist people who are threatened by this murderous rage."

Such statements are hypocritical to the core. The roots of the emergence of ISIS, formerly known as Al Qaeda in Iraq, lie in the US financing and backing of the Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan during the 1980s. The organisation emerged in Iraq in the midst of sectarian violence encouraged by the US occupation, expanding into Syria as part of the US-backed regime change operation against President Bashar al-Assad.

As long as ISIS was carrying out its beheadings and other atrocities in Syria, directed against Bashar al-Assad's regime, the US and its partners remained silent on the barbarity of the Islamists, because they were supposedly fighters for "freedom" and "democracy." It was not until ISIS swept into Iraq, taking advantage of the utter devastation and sectarian divides produced by the US occupation, that ISIS's crimes were suddenly denounced as "terrorist" slaughters.

Now, the horrific murders of journalists are being turned into a pretext for another full-scale

war of aggression in the Middle East, driven by the same underlying agenda—to exercise unchallenged US domination over the entire region.

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