

ISIS: US-made Monster Running Amok in Middle East

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In its desire to topple Syrian President Bashar Assad, the US channeled arms and funds to the Syrian rebels, many of whom splintered off and formed the Islamic State, which is now giving the US far more problems than it had bargained for.

One year ago, it seemed certain that Washington would launch a military strike on Syria, bringing to its knees yet another undesirable government in the Middle East. However, at the eleventh hour, an incredible thing happened: President Barack Obama requested approval from Congress before using military force in Syria. While some were tempted to applaud the Democratic leader for doing something as radical as upholding the US Constitution, other factors played a role in the decision.

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AFP Photo / Ahmad AL-Rubaye

One of the most convincing reasons for Obama balking on war (aside from Britain politely excusing itself from the expedition) could be summed up by damning comments by Texas Senator Ted Cruz, who famously remarked that the US military should not be serving as “Al-Qaeda’s air force.”

“We should be focused on defending the United States of America. That’s why young men and women sign up to join the military, not to, as you know, serve as Al-Qaeda’s air force.”

Suddenly, the American public was forced to fathom the unfathomable: In Syria the US was lending support to the rebels that were getting help from the same terrorist organization that attacked Manhattan and Washington on Sept. 11, killing some 3,000 citizens.

Needless to say, the political stakes involved in advocating on behalf of the Al-Qaeda-linked Syrian rebels suddenly got a lot riskier.

The Texas Senator said that of nine militant groups fighting against Syrian government forces “at least seven had direct connections to Al-Qaeda.” *Arming and funding known terrorists in Syria “makes no sense whatsoever,”* he said.

Cruz then reminded his colleagues on the basic rules of foreign policy.

"I'll give you one of the simplest principles of foreign policy that we ought to be following: Don't give weapons to people who hate you. Don't give weapons to people who want to kill you."



Reuters / Osama Al-dulaimi

Cruz's comments attracted the wrath of American hawks, most notably from Republican Sen. John McCain, who last May secretly flew to Syria to meet with rebel leaders, including General Salem Idriss of the Free Syrian Army. McCain, suddenly characterized in the same league as Al-Qaeda, slammed Cruz's claims as "totally uninformed."

However, it was not only the Republicans, of course, beating the [war drum](#) for military action in Syria. Last year, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went on record as saying: *"We will work with like-minded states to support the Syrian opposition to hasten the day when Assad falls."*

Ultimately, critics of America's activities in Syria proved right. Supporting the Syrian rebels without understanding the true nature and character of these individuals marked yet another US foreign policy setback in the region.

Islamic State rising

Almost overnight, many of the Syrian rebels - some of them Al-Qaeda members - working to overthrow the Assad regime broke away and formed what has come to be known as the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant, or Islamic State (IS) for short.

The dramatic rise of this group almost defies belief, but apparently its willingness to use extreme forms of violence explains part of their sudden popularity.

On the other hand, IS is said to be so cruel and vicious that it managed to get disavowed by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al-Qaeda, the very same group of terrorists that thought nothing of flying commercial aircraft into the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

The latest victim of IS' cruelty was James Foley, a freelance journalist who disappeared in Syria in November 2012. On August 19, a video briefly surfaced entitled, "A Message to America" that showed Foley kneeling at an unknown desert location. After delivering a brief statement that is critical of the United States government, the video fades out as an alleged IS militant is seen dragging a knife across Foley's neck.

It should be mentioned that some analysts have questioned the legitimacy of the IS video on several accounts, namely the apparent censorship of the beheading: If IS is indeed so cruel and vicious why was the actual moment of the beheading concealed? Also, no Arabic is spoken in the video. Foley's captor and apparent executioner delivers a brief address in the English language, which might be understandable since some IS members hail from Britain. And why is the video not of the grainy, shaky sort usually put out; why is it so polished? It is questions like these that have caused some to believe the video was a carefully staged event, although few doubt that Foley was indeed executed.

However, such questions are not hurting the membership drive of IS: according to one of Iraq's most respected security experts the number of Islamic State recruits is much higher than that estimated by foreign observers - around 100,000. Foreign estimates put the figure between 20,000 and 50,000.

Meanwhile, the US government is tracking as many as 300 Americans reportedly in the ranks of Islamic State. Washington has expressed concern that these radicalized civilians could become a risk to the US if they return home with skills learned overseas to carry out attacks, anonymous US officials said, according to the Washington Times.



Reuters / Osama Al-dulaimi

"We know that there are several hundred American passport holders running around with ISIS in Syria or Iraq," a senior US official said. "It's hard to tell whether or not they're in Syria or moved to Iraq."

"ISIS now presents itself as an ideologically superior alternative to Al-Qaeda within the jihadi community and it has publicly challenged the legitimacy of Al-

Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri,” said Charles Lister, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, in a [paper](#) last month. “As such it has increasingly become a transnational movement with immediate objectives far beyond Iraq and Syria.”

The reason for the surge is that IS is quite effective at swallowing up other insurgent groups.

“[The] Islamic State didn’t come from nowhere,” according to Hisham al-Hashimi, who advises Iraq’s intelligence services and analyzes information gathered on the ground. The organization “is an extension of groups that existed before – historically and ideologically,” al-Hashimi told Mashable.

If the Islamic State’s sensational rise to power sounds familiar, that’s because it is. Back in the 1970s, the United States armed and trained the mujahedeen in Afghanistan to help fight against Soviet troops in the decade-long Afghanistan War (Dec. 1979 to Feb. 1989). Those fierce fighters, under the leadership of Osama bin Laden, eventually morphed into Al-Qaeda, which turned out to be the first foreign adversary of the United States to launch a successful attack on the US mainland.

Now IS too has threatened to bring the war to America’s front door.

A backdoor to war into Syria?

Ironically, the explosive rise of IS across a wide swath of Iraq and Syria is handing the Obama administration an opportunity for doing what it could not do one year earlier: Open a military offensive in Syria. Following the reports of decapitated Christian babies, and the beheading of the American James Foley, it will be harder for critics like Ted Cruz to question a military operation against IS – even in Syria.

In fact, the US media seems to be priming the American public for yet another Syrian showdown: *“The Pentagon began preparing options for an assault on Islamic State fighters after the militants last week posted a gruesome video showing the beheading of American photojournalist James Foley. Deliberations by Obama’s national security team on expanding the campaign against Islamic State from Iraq into neighboring Syria gathered pace in recent days,”* Reuters reported on Thursday, quoting unnamed officials.

“From unmanned armed drones to powerful Stealth bombers, a wide range of U.S. airpower is at Obama’s disposal, including possible missiles fired from warships at sea or from aircraft flying outside Syria’s borders.”

The obvious question is: Will a US military attack on IS positions in northern Syria eventually snowball into a full-blown war with Syria? President Assad has already warned that any foreign military actions on the territory of his country will be considered an act of war.

And that may be exactly what the hawks in Washington want to hear.

Robert Bridge is author of the book, [Midnight in the American Empire](#), which discusses the dangerous consequences of extreme corporate power in the United States.

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