

The Islamic State and Obama's Diabolical "Hidden Agenda": Iraq, Syria and "Superpower Prerogatives"

By [Jack A. Smith](#)

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There is a pronounced deceptive aura to the Obama Administration's disclosures about the new U.S. war in Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State (IS). The White House even says it is not a war but a simple counter-terrorism strategy, as in Yemen. This is intended to mislead Americans and to generate substantial support for the long war to come.

Every U.S. military intervention in Muslim countries since the late 1970s has eventually resulted in "unintended" negative consequences, both for Washington and the target country. There is no reason to think that President Obama's latest Middle East military adventure will turn out differently — perhaps even worse because his objectives go far beyond what has been publicly announced.

In his speech to the nation on Sept. 10 Obama said the purpose of the mission was to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State. He revealed, "I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL (IS) in Syria as well as Iraq," and emphasized there would be no U.S. ground troops. (The Iraqi government says it does not want more than a token number of U.S. soldiers on its territory.) The Pentagon and CIA will handle the jet fighters, bombers, and drones. Surveillance, communications, intelligence, training, financing and probably the concealed leadership of the ground war are on Uncle Sam's agenda as well.

Obama's intention to bring his air war against IS to Syria may result in a serious violation of international law. The Damascus government has said it will allow the U.S. to act but Washington must first ask permission to bomb its territory. The White House indicated it has no desire to ask for authorization. In addition, the Russian government, which supports and supplies arms to both Iran and Syria, pointed out that any such strike against Syria would need backing from the UN Security Council. Otherwise, it "would constitute an act of aggression."

The White House is building a 40-nation coalition of mainly European and Middle Eastern allies to support the new war, but little activity is expected from most of the members. The U.S. has not invited either Iran or Syria to take part — a concession to the many anti-Shi'ite Sunni states in the coalition and, of course, to Congress and leaders of his own party. Both Iran and Syria criticized the decision to exclude them (though Iran may have rejected the invitation were it offered) and for supporting jihadist groups fighting in Syria. A senior Iranian official told Al-Monitor Sept. 11:

"The U.S. claims it's fighting terrorism while cooperating with those backing

the terrorist groups. It's not only that; they want to arm other terrorist groups in Syria under the pretext they are moderate Islamists. Everyone knows who they are and what agenda they are serving."

As the global hegemon at a time of diminishing credibility, and with a profound interest in controlling the oil-soaked Middle East, the U.S. had little choice but to intervene militarily lest it appear to be weak and irresolute — a posture that surely would demean Washington's vaunted leadership.

In the process of keeping up superpower appearances by planning to crush the Islamic State — which deserves to be crushed, but primarily by the Iraqi and Syrian governments with support from Iran, not the imperial overlord — President Obama has other goals in mind that have not been articulated.

Mainly it is to place the entire Middle East, not just most of it, as now, under U.S. control in order for Washington to concentrate far more attention on Asia and containing the rise of China.

There are only three countries in the Middle East that are not totally within the U.S. orbit — Iran, since the revolution of 1979; Syria, which has experienced rarely-on-and-mostly-off relations with Washington for decades, now presently off; and Iraq, a bombing target of four U.S. presidents, the object of two wars and years of killer sanctions, now primarily close to Iran with waning ties to its former occupier.

It so happens that these three countries are not only allies, but Iran and Iraq have majority Shi'ite populations, and Syria is led by an Alawite (Shi'ite derivative) government of President Bashar al-Assad. In addition, all three are backed by Russia, which the U.S. finds intolerable, and sometimes by China.

In addition, the principal contradiction within Middle Eastern Islam is between the Sunni and Shi'ite religious branches of Islam. The Shia comprise up to 13% of the Muslim world's 1.7 billion people; the rest are Sunni, with some small offshoots from both. Saudi Arabia and the Sunni majority of countries in the region are appalled by the increasing power of the Shia, especially since the downfall of the minority Sunni government in Baghdad as a consequence of the U.S. invasion, and the Shi'ite rise to power.

At this stage, the U.S. (geo-politically) and Saudi Arabia plus the regional Sunni countries (geo-religiously), are aligned in seeking to overthrow the Assad regime and break its ties with Iran. The Sunnis also back U.S. efforts to weaken Iranian influence in Iraq. And the U.S., the Sunni countries and Israel desire to weaken and isolate Iran.

It is hardly illogical for the White House to entertain the idea of using this crisis to attain longer-range objectives. It seems likely that at some point during this protracted engagement with IS the White House will unchain the dogs of war — the "moderate" opposition to Assad — in the direction of Damascus. Obama is already regaining some clout in Baghdad by virtue of his bombing campaign and other assistance to new Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who replaced the ousted Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, whom the U.S. blamed for alienating the Iraqi Sunnis. Weakening Iran is a much tougher project but U.S. sanctions have hurt the economy and the possible loss of its Syrian ally would certainly reduce Tehran's reach.

The abrupt materialization of IS (then called ISIS for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) at the beginning of this year and its swift takeover of territory in Anbar Province was watched carefully by the U.S., but little action was taken for months. The Islamic State is a formidable enemy, far more sophisticated than earlier jihadist organizations. Here is how The Economist described its abilities Sept. 13:

“What has characterized IS so far is its combination of strategic patience, the ability to design and direct complex military operations simultaneously in Syria and Iraq, and hybrid warfare that fuses terrorist and insurgent techniques with conventional fighting. Among the tactics it has developed is to soften targets with artillery, or open a breach with suicide bombings, and then attack with swarms of armored Humvees mounted with anti-aircraft guns coming from what seems like all directions at once. Its aggression, speed, firepower and readiness to take casualties, combined with the well-publicized savagery that awaits anyone taken captive, terrorizes defenders into flight.... Although air power may contain IS, it will take ground forces to push its fighters out of the Sunni cities it has taken — and keep them out.”

The Islamic State was initially funded by Saudi Arabia and wealthy backers but now is earning about \$3 million a day from selling Iraqi oil at discount prices in Turkey, smuggling, theft and extortion.

Washington acknowledged the seriousness of the IS advance in early June when it quickly captured Mosul, a city of 665,000, people and routed four divisions of the Iraqi army, capturing huge quantities of U.S. weapons and vehicles, emptying the banks and murdering military and civilian prisoners. IS then captured Tikrit, the hometown of former President Saddam Hussein. It was clear by then that a relatively large portion of the disaffected Sunni population of Iraq was giving support to IS. Since January IS has forced over a million Iraqis and Kurds from their homes. The number of dead civilians is not available.

Obama conveyed the impression for several weeks that he was reluctant to become involved in another conflict in Iraq but this was largely for show until the Pentagon decided on war plans, the State Department gathered preliminary pledges of support from key allies, and pressure on him to act mounted in Congress and among the American people. Obama remembered the contrived brouhaha that developed after the relatively small scale Benghazi, Libya, affair in 2012, and was determined to be “forced” to fight IS. The two beheadings of American journalists turned the tide into a flood of demands for action.

In his nationwide speech announcing the new strategy, President Obama several times stressed deceptively that the American people were “threatened” by IS. The U.S. is no more threatened by the IS than it was in 2002 when President George W. Bush began to convince Americans to fear Iraqi terrorism in the “homeland.” According to a Wall St. Journal opinion survey in the days following the speech, 62% of voters supported Obama’s call to action, “but nearly 70% saw low odds of success.”

President Obama maintains no American soldiers will be sent to fight “on the ground” in Iraq and Syria, but 1,600 are already there as “advisers,” and more will follow as the war continues over the next several years. Special Forces will operate as spotters for U.S. aircraft and other detachments will join Iraqi and Kurdish and troops in combat to provide guidance and leadership, only firing if fired upon, as inevitably occurs. Under certain circumstances larger numbers of American forces may be secretly inserted into Iraq under a

government regulation that can legally deny the truth to the American people about clandestine military action by the Pentagon and CIA.

Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff paved the way for the eventual introduction of larger numbers of U.S. ground forces by indicating he would recommend precisely that if IS was able to withstand the American air war and allied ground troops. Dempsey also suggests that half the Iraqi army is not competent and the other half needs to be “rebuilt.” This is an interesting tribute to the \$25 billion U.S. investment in training the Iraqi military.

The Iraqi government does not want a large contingent of U.S. soldiers back on its soil. While voicing support for the American campaign against IS, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani declared Sept. 19:

“All political leaders of the country must be aware and awake to prevent the external assistance against the Islamic State from becoming an entrance to breach Iraq’s independence.... Cooperation with the international effort shall not be taken as a pretext to impose foreign decisions on events in Iraq, especially military events.”

Obama did not mention in his speech an intention to destroy the Assad government, which the U.S. has sought to accomplish for the last three years. Judging from his battle plans, this is precisely what he intends to do as well as attack IS.

Why else finance, arm and train fighters from Syria’s anti-Assad “moderate” opposition to allegedly fight on the ground against IS in Syria?

Why would they join up unless the payoff was Assad’s head? The initial goal is to train a special unit of over 5,000 of these moderates, expanding the number if the war demands. Some experts question whether there are even that many moderates in Syria’s rebel ranks. Congress has already appropriated a half billion dollars for Obama to train and equip the so-called moderates. Whether they fight against IS is problematic, but they are clearly devoted to violently replacing Assad with a Sunni-led regime that — for most of the moderates and all of the extremists —eventually would impose fundamentalist Sharia law throughout the country.

The Obama Administration has never explained what it means by moderate opposition. There are over 1,500 groups involved in the fight to remove President Assad, according to James Clapper, director of national intelligence. Except for about two dozen organizations the rest are quite small. Nearly all the large opposition groups are composed of extreme Sunni fundamentalists. The Islamic State is the largest, followed the al-Nusra Front (al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria). These two will be ruled out by the White House, but evidently not the so-called moderate groups that have coordinated their independent actions with IS or Nusra in the past. The other large fighting organizations are composed of various Sunni jihadist military groups and the secular Free Syrian Army (FSA) that has been supported by Washington since its inception, along with others, but is no longer a major force. Many members of this group and jihadist organizations have defected to the IS.

According to an editorial in the New York Times Sept. 13:

“Groups identified by Western intelligence agencies as the moderate opposition — those that might support democracy and respect human rights — have been weak, divided and without coherent plans or sustained command structures capable of toppling the Assad regime. Today, those so-called moderates are even weaker and more divided; in some cases, their best fighters are hard-line Islamists.”

In terms of the FSA, journalist Robert Fisk wrote in CounterPunch Sept. 14:

“Then there’s the reinvention of the ‘moderate’ Syrian opposition which was once called the Free Syrian Army, a force of deserters corrupted and betrayed by both the West and its Islamic allies — and which no longer exists. This ghost army is now going to be called the ‘Syrian National Coalition’ and be trained — of all places — in Saudi Arabia, whose citizens have given zillions of dollars to al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS and now IS, al-Nusra and sundry other bad guys.”

Obama seems to entertain the questionable notion that all these “moderate” groups see themselves threatened by the IS juggernaut and can be bought off with money, heavy weapons and expert training to turn their guns on the religio-fascists. The fact is, however, that many of these jihadist fighters, and the FSA as well, recently signed a pact with IS not to fight each other but to cooperate in destroying the Damascus government.

The Obama Administration shares a large responsibility for the fact that Syria has been transformed into a breeding, training and killing ground for violent Sunni jihadist organizations. The U.S. demand to overthrow the Assad regime created an open season for such groups. Obama looked on passively as one fundamentalist fighting force after another entered the country to join the crusade over the last two years.

Yet another violent organization, “led by a shadowy figure who was once among Osama bin Laden’s inner circle [that] posed a more direct threat [than IS] to America and Europe” has been discovered recently, according to the New York Times Sept 21, which continued: “American officials said that the group called Khorasan had emerged in the past year as the cell in Syria that may be the most intent on hitting the United States or its installations overseas with a terror attack. The officials said that the group is led by Muhsin al-Fadhli, a senior Qaeda operative who, according to the State Department, was so close to Bin Laden that he was among a small group of people who knew about the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks before they were launched.”

All of the jihadist fighting groups have been subsidized by various Sunni governments in the Middle East and their wealthy citizens. Saudi Arabia is the major source of funding for most of the jihadist organizations but other Arab countries and non-Arab Turkey have also been heavy contributors to virtually all the fundamentalist opposition. Turkey as well has opened its gates to foreign jihadists traveling to Syria to join the fight. Aside from being the cheerleader for regime change, the U.S. has financed, armed or trained more secular and “moderate” groups.

It is of interest that Obama has chosen Saudi Arabia — the big funder of the Syrian jihadists — to train these forces in military skills and discipline. The Saudis now oppose IS, which they once supported, because they see it as a rival for Sunni leadership in the Middle East. At the same time their puritanical fundamentalist Islamic religious views — Wahhabism — are

nearly identical to the jihadist Salafi movement that includes IS, al-Qaeda, and other groups in the anti-Assad campaign.

An insight into Saudi Arabia's plans was published Sept. 14 by Stratfor:

"Ideally, the [Saudi] kingdom would like to harness the power of a virulently anti-Shi'ite group such as the Islamic State to topple the Syrian regime and weaken the Shia in both Iraq and Lebanon, thus forcing the Iranians back into their Persian core [in Iran]. The problem is that the Saudis do not control the Islamic State.

"Moreover, Riyadh [the Saudi capital] is competing with groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda for a monopoly over the concepts of Salafism and jihad. This is why the Saudis have been putting together a coalition of Syrian rebels, many of whom are Salafist-jihadists who do not share the Islamic State's ambition to establish a caliphate and are willing to go only as far as the Saudis command them to. Saudi Arabia is thus hoping that U.S. military power will help neutralize the Islamic State and allow its proxies to take over the territories currently under the jihadist group's control [italics ours]. This way the transnational jihadist threat will be removed and the kingdom can make progress toward ousting al Assad."

The U.S. seeks a majority Sunni regime in Damascus for its own ambitions, but Obama will insist the jihadist component drop the demand for Sharia, at least for now, and support representation, not repression, for the 35% non-Sunni population and for secular Sunnis, a number of whom are fighting against Assad.

Washington wants a government in Damascus that offers an approximation of democracy, an absolute end to the country's close relationship with Shi'ite Iran, and expects to have its interests respected and advice sought. If the "moderates" (jihadists in most cases) cooperate they will be given a seat at the new government table — as were the Ukrainian fascists when they helped overthrow a pro-Russian president earlier this year.

The United States has been deeply involved since the late 1970s in manipulating the politics of selected Muslim governments to serve its own hegemonic interests. Often the tactic is regime change through direct military intervention, as in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, or efforts to overthrow governments by supplying money, arms and other incentives to opposition forces, as in Syria. One inevitable consequence of American interference, even when it appears to be successful, is that fundamentalist jihadi movements multiply in size and new trouble spots emerge.

It is doubtful al-Qaeda had more than several hundred full time operatives at the time of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. It was reported this week that the IS includes an estimated 30,000 to 45,000 effectives in its "state" located in northwest Iraq and northeast Syria and expanding. In early June when IS conquered Mosul, the Pentagon estimated it had 3,000 to 5,000 troops all told. Of the present higher number,

15,000 hold foreign passports, including over 2,000 Europeans and 100 Americans. Those who survive may come home one day, providing a justification for the U.S. and others to expand their already extensive surveillance capabilities.

At present conservative religious monarchies, dictators and authoritarian regimes govern

nearly all countries in the Middle East. All of them, despite contempt toward the U.S. for its liberal democracy and overbearing hypocrisy, ultimately are in liege to the global hegemon in Washington that protects them, and supplies the weapons and intelligence to keep these regimes in power. Extreme Arab government repression backed by the White House crushed the Arab left as an alternative decades ago.

Religious fundamentalism and jihadism are today's alternative for many young Islamist men dissatisfied with their corrupt governments and infused with hatred toward the U.S. for its humiliating interventions, support for Israel, and overpowering violence. Many are now flocking to the black flag of IS in Syria and Iraq and to various other jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda offshoots in the Middle East, North Africa and now deeper into Africa and touching on Asia.

There of many millions of Muslims (Arabs, Kurds and Iranians) who will fight the Islamic State. They do not have to do so on behalf of the objectives of either the U.S., Saudi Arabia and their various hangers on who now control the region.

The Syrian army is a tough and experienced military force. Some 75,000 of its soldiers and militia members are reported to have been killed in the last three years — and yet it holds on. This is the force that should fight IS, not those under a U.S. command who are mainly being recruited to defeat the Syrian government.

Syria has an air force, as do Iraq and Iran. If the U.S. called off its dogs, ended its regime change mantra and worked with Syria, Iraq and Iran the days of IS would be numbered more quickly. In fact, those three countries, without the U.S., could do the job if they weren't being undermined and sanctioned.

The 350,000 member Iraqi army is suffering disgrace because of its failure in Mosul. But this defeat has many causes. The Bush Administration foolishly disbanded the existing Iraqi army two months after the 2003 invasion, putting 400,000 soldiers out of work in a wrecked economy that was not hiring new workers. The officer corps was jobless with a black mark on work records (and a number of leading Sunni officers, who were loyal to the pre-war regime, have lately turned up on the side of IS to show their opposition to the government).

The Mosul debacle was largely the product of bad leadership. Commanding officers are said to have fled, leaving the soldiers to fend for themselves. This force can be rebuilt by Iraqis, assisted by several experienced Shi'ite militias (under orders to treat Sunnis fairly), and backed in various ways by Iran. Patrick Cockburn wrote recently "the most potent fighting force on the [Iraqi] government side is the Shia militias, most though not all of which are led or advised by Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers. Iran is crucial for the defense of the Baghdad government."

The Iraqi army will take the field when the Baghdad government gets its act together, but it probably will be under the de facto direction of the United States.

Obama considers the Syrian army — the main bulwark against a jihadist takeover — his enemy because it defends an Iran-friendly government in Damascus. He wants to do what Bush did to the Iraqi military. He stubbornly will not call off his intention to overthrow Assad and will definitely not openly welcome Iran into the picture.

In addition to his geopolitical rationale, Obama fears heavy criticism from a reactionary

Congress, from neocon leaders of his own party (such as Hillary Clinton), and from supporters of jihadism such as one of America's closest allies, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic State can be defeated, but it is difficult to grasp how the White House strategy as Obama explained things can do the job. There's certainly more to the plan than has been revealed, undoubtedly including ousting Assad. Regardless, the odds are that the U.S. will end up losing more than it gained, as in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Jack A. Smith is editor of the *Activist Newsletter* and is former editor of the (U.S.) *Guardian Newsweekly*. He may be reached at jacdon@earthlink.net or <http://activistnewsletter.blogspot.com>

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