

Washington Allies with ISIS as Great Power Conflict Trumps “War on Terror”

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The “National Defense Strategy” document released at the beginning of this year declared bluntly that the nearly two-decade focus by the US military on the so-called “global war on terrorism” had come to an end. In its place, a new strategic orientation was being introduced based on preparing for “great power” confrontation, i.e., war with nuclear-armed Russia and China.

This was the first such defense strategy to be issued by the Pentagon in over a decade and expressed the urgency with which Washington views the preparations for a third world war.

A particularly crude and criminal outcome of this policy shift is becoming increasingly apparent in three major theaters where US forces are engaged in active combat operations. Reports from Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan provide firm evidence that the US and its local proxies are allying themselves with and employing the services of elements of ISIS and Al Qaeda in the pursuit of Washington’s broader strategic interests.

In Yemen, hundreds, if not thousands, of fighters from Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), branded by the US government as the “most dangerous” affiliate of the loose international Al Qaeda network, have been recruited by Washington’s closest allies in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to fight as foot soldiers in the near-genocidal US-backed war that these Persian Gulf oil monarchies have been waging against the impoverished country of Yemen since 2015.

According to an investigative report published Monday by the Associated Press, the Saudi-led coalition “cut secret deals with al-Qaida fighters, paying some to leave key cities and towns and letting others retreat with weapons, equipment and wads of looted cash... Hundreds more were recruited to join the coalition itself.”

It added that “Key participants in the pacts said the US was aware of the arrangements and held off on any drone strikes.”

“Elements of the US military are clearly aware that much of what the US is doing in Yemen is aiding AQAP and there is much angst about that,” Michael Horton, a senior analyst at the Jamestown Foundation, a CIA-connected Washington think tank, told the AP.

“However, supporting the UAE and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia against what the US views as Iranian expansionism takes priority over battling AQAP and

even stabilizing Yemen," Horton added.

This is a gross understatement. Washington is providing indispensable military support for a war that has reduced millions of Yemenis to the brink of starvation. It is prepared to wipe out much of the country's population in order to bolster its strategic position and that of the reactionary Arab regimes with which it is allied against the perceived threat of Iranian influence to US regional hegemony.

The war has escalated in recent days in the ongoing siege of the Yemeni Red Sea port of Hodeidah, which was green-lighted by the Trump administration. The UN has warned that a quarter of a million people could lose their lives in this operation, while millions more across the country may die of starvation if it shuts down the port, the sole lifeline for food, fuel and medicine for at least 70 percent of the population.

Recruiting Al Qaeda fighters to slaughter Yemenis in this immense and bloody war crime is entirely consistent with US policy.

In regard to Syria, meanwhile, Russia's Defense Ministry last Thursday issued a statement warning that ISIS has increasingly concentrated its forces in the area around al-Tanaf, near the Syrian-Iraqi border, where the US military maintains a military base and has unilaterally declared a 34-mile exclusion zone around it. US troops there have provided training to so-called "rebels" opposing the government of President Bashar al-Assad and appear to be providing a security screen for ISIS.

Launched on the pretext of carrying out the "annihilation" of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the illegal US military intervention in Syria has repeatedly seen the US and its local proxies facilitate the flight of ISIS from besieged cities. The most notorious incident was in Raqqa, where a column of vehicles carried 4,000 ISIS fighters and family members, along with their weapons, ammunition and explosives, into the eastern Syrian desert.

The goal was to turn these fighters against government troops and aid in the US operation to deprive Damascus of control over Syria's oil and gas fields, which are vital for the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country. The US aims in Syria are bound up with wider preparations for war not only against Iran, but against Russia as well.

Finally, in regard to Afghanistan, where the US has waged war for nearly 17 years, the *New York Times* published an article Sunday titled, "Are ISIS Fighters Prisoners or Honored Guests of the Afghan Government?"

The article reported how two senior commanders of ISIS, along with 250 of their fighters, had surrendered to the US-backed Afghan National Army to avoid being routed by the Taliban in northern Afghanistan.

"If they were prisoners, however, it was hard to tell," the Times reported. "The government arranged for them to stay in a guesthouse in the provincial capital of Sheberghan. Guards were posted around it not to keep the insurgents in, but to keep their potential enemies out, according to the provincial governor. Although the fighters were disarmed, they were allowed to keep their cell phones and other personal possessions."

The *Times* added,

“The dubious nature of the Islamic State surrender has proved a propaganda bonanza for the Taliban.”

The newspaper does not provide any details on the nature of this “propaganda,” but it does report that the ISIS fighters “were ferried from the battlefield in Afghan Army helicopters, avoiding a potentially dangerous journey on the roads.”

The obvious conclusion from this account is that ISIS has functioned as a US asset in Afghanistan, attacking the Taliban and carrying out atrocities aimed at precluding any negotiated resolution of the conflict that does not serve US geo-strategic interests in the region.

This more or less open alliance between the Pentagon and ISIS, a supposed prime target in multiple US military interventions across three continents, is not so much a new policy as the revival of an old one that was never fully abandoned, despite the inflated rhetoric of that greatest of all “fake news” stories, the “global war on terrorism.”

Al Qaeda, the original supposed arch enemy in this unending war, was the direct product of CIA and US support for the Islamist mujahideen in Afghanistan against the Soviet-backed government in the 1980s. Since then, these elements have had a dual use for US imperialism, serving at one stage as proxy forces in wars for regime change, and at another as a pretext for US interventions in the name of fighting terror.

Under the mantle of the “war on terrorism,” successive US governments, Democratic and Republican alike, have not only conducted wars whose victims number in the millions, but also carried out an unrelenting attack on democratic rights, from domestic spying to censoring the Internet.

The emerging international alliance between the Pentagon and ISIS only serves to expose the real interests underlying these policies, which are bound up with the waging of war to offset US imperialism’s loss of economic preeminence and defend its crumbling global hegemony, and domestic repression to sustain a social order characterized by the most extreme inequality in modern American history.

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