

Debacle of a “Great Game”: The Islamic State (IS) and America’s War on Iraq and Syria

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Global Research, August 10, 2014

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#), [SYRIA](#)

Introductory Note

This essay puts the present focus on the crisis in Iraq caused by the ISIS insurgency in the context of the historical and contemporary forces that have shaped and are still shaping the conflict in Iraq and the MENA (Middle East and North Africa).

It falls in line with a policy overseen by the United States which is predicated on the re-drawing of the Middle Eastern map i.e. balkanization and of ‘managing’ a series of manufactured conflicts which are ultimately designed to protect America’s access to the natural resources of the region.

This overarching policy accommodates a confluence of interests that cater to the hegemonic aspirations of the state of Israel, Saudi Arabia & the Sunni Gulf States and Turkey. It pits the United States and these allies against the Shia Crescent led by Iran whose allies are Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Two key points contended here are:

1.The present crisis derives from the decision to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein on a false premise and that the overriding motivation of the influential neo-conservative group within the Bush administration was to destroy Iraq to benefit the state of Israel.

2.The present crisis is an extension of the war against the Syrian government of Bashar Assad which was manufactured by outside powers for the following ends:

- *To destroy a government with an anti-Israel stance.*
- *To replace the minority Alawite government of Assad with a Sunni one which would comply with Saudi, Qatari and Turkish plans to build a natural gas pipeline from the Gulf to Turkey which would supply Europe with natural gas.*
- *Destroying Alawite power in Syria would weaken Iran (and break its link with Hezbollah in Lebanon); the Iranians being the current existential threat to the Israeli state that Saddam and Nasser once were. The Shi’ite Iranians are the chief competitors of the Sunni Saudis for influence in the Middle East and of course the Iranians do not follow the dictates of Washington.*

Evidence is provided of Israel’s historical and continuing motivation to break up Arab states and to stimulate turmoil via the policies of David Ben-Gurion and successive Israeli leaders as well as by reference to policy papers such as the ‘Yinon Plan’(1982) and the ‘Clean Break

Document (1996).

Evidence is provided of the United States motive in fomenting sectarian conflicts and supporting extreme Islamic group as has occurred in Libya, Syria and Iraq. It is based on maintaining American economic and military hegemony and is outlined in a policy paper funded by the US Army and produced by the RAND Corporation entitled 'Unfolding the Future of the Long War: Motivations, Prospects and Implications for the U.S. Army' (2008).

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The declaration on 29th June, the first day of the holy month of Ramadan, of an Islamic Caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of al-Dawlah Al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq wa-al-Sham –the jihadist organisation known also as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – marks a watershed of sorts since the commencement of what used to be commonly termed as the 'Clash of Civilizations'.

For in the post-Cold War era, even before the 'catalyzing event' that was September the 11th of 2001, the avowed goal of the Osama Bin Laden-led al-Qaeda movement was to create a Sunni-led Caliphate.

It has been the dream not only of the Islamic zealot but also, perhaps, the latent hope of many ordinary Muslims to have a unity of Mohammedans in a political state on a scale at least equalling those which existed in succeeding epochs during what may be referred to as the golden age of Islamic civilization.

At the helm of such an entity would be a caliph who would command a global empire of the *Ummah* or believers stretching from the western part of North Africa and even the Iberian Peninsula through the Middle East and south Asia and on to the Indonesian archipelago.

To many Jihadists, the re-creation of the borders of previous Caliphates such as those presided over by the Rashiduns, Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids and Ottomans would be an unambitious delimitation of what they feel should ideally cover all areas of the globe.

The ever changing name of the organisation first known the Islamic State in Iraq then as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or the Levant and as of August 2014 simply the Islamic State has seemingly reflected its geographic aspirations and its latest perhaps reflective of its resolve to escape the limitation to identifiable, colonially national imposed borders.

Certainly, the historical record of the Caliphate is redolent of an irresistible need to expand as far as possible by means of conquest. It was, for instance, the goal of the Sokoto Caliphate located in modern Nigeria and extending to a vast range of West Africa to expand the frontiers of Islam further south in order, the euphemism went, for its warriors to 'dip' the Holy Koran into the waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

The June rampage of ISIS in a murderous *Blitzkrieg* starting from the eastern borders of strife-ridden Syria through the northern part of Iraq caught the attention of the world. Amid stories of Iraqi army commanders apparently deserting their posts, cities such as Tikrit, Fallujah and Mosul fell.

These startling events along with evidence of wanton violence perpetrated against civilian populations saw media outlets reflect the American government's projection of the

insurgents as an extreme species of Islamic fanaticism surpassing even that of al-Qaeda which had to be stopped at all costs.

Such 'cost', it was claimed, would even countenance an alliance of sorts with the Iranian state, the arch-enemy consigned to the infamous status of an 'Axis of Evil' nation and presently subjected to the most punitive measures of economic sanctions mounted against any nation-state in recent years.

The crisis of ISIS is, of course, not an isolated, self-incubated phenomenon but rather is the latest installment in a chain of events that goes back to the decision of the United States to invade Iraq in 2003 in order to effect the removal of the regime headed by Saddam Hussein.

It is also an episode which on closer examination may bear the hallmarks of precise direction and manipulation by foreign powers. It appeared deeply suspicious to some who noted the speed by which the Iraqi army's resistance to ISIS penetration crumbled.

How could an army with vastly superior numbers and equipment be overrun so quickly? Why did the commanders in Mosul and Tikrit reportedly desert their posts and instruct soldiers to leave?

The implication is that they may have been bribed to do so. Of this proposition, no concrete evidence has materialised, although the alternative proposition, that a lack of professionalism and cohesion within a dysfunctional army that is the product of a dysfunctional state suddenly confronted by hordes of battle-hardened and ideologically motivated fanatics is a compelling one.

Many Shia soldiers are reportedly unwilling to fight for the Iraqi state.

Still, there are some analysts who believe that it is a situation which has been manufactured with the specific aim of applying pressure on the Iraqi government led by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and that it has a medium-term endeavour of reversing the fast dissipating fortunes of the intervention which deliberately fomented a war within the borders of Syria which itself is part of a longer-term objective of redrawing the borders of the Middle East.

The instability that has in recent times befallen Iraq and Syria and which at any time could conceivably combust into a full-blown regional war represents a confluence of interests; a merger in fact of the imperial designs of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel.

It is a state of affairs underpinned by the active collaboration of the United States but finds resistance from counter-measures employed by the Islamic Republic of Iran which seeks to preserve the 'Shia Crescent' which extends from the Persian Gulf to the eastern Mediterranean.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia which serves as the custodian of the sacred relics of Islam is concerned with asserting Sunni hegemony throughout the region while the Zionist state of Israel has consistently fostered an agenda of balkanisation as a guarantee of its survival.

The motivations of Turkey under the 'soft-Islamist' government of Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, ostensibly, are less clear-cut given Turkey's longstanding 'Zero Problems with Neighbours' policy. Not least are the implications of what a large-scale amendment to the borders of the region could have on Kurdish nationalist aspirations.

Nonetheless, if the frequently bandied descriptions of Turkish neo-Ottoman pretensions sound banal and analytically lazy, the projection of Turkish influence in the region is clearly at the heart of Erdogan's recalibrations in his relations with both Syria and Iraq.

The United States for its part has largely been concerned with overthrowing regimes which do not toe the line; those of Saddam Hussein and Libya's Muamar Gaddafi being the prime examples along with the attempt to unseat Bashar Assad in Syria.

While a general impression of disengagement from the region is being given by the policies of the Obama administration which has overseen the withdrawal of combat forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, the overall direction and underpinning rationale of United States policy is to continue the decades-long intrigues which have been geared towards weakening the power of Iran; and if possible, to effect the overthrow of the Islamic system of government which has been in place since the abdication of the US-backed Shah in 1979.

Notwithstanding the rapprochement of sorts which has followed the change of leadership and that is primarily evidenced by the continuing talks over its nuclear developing capacity, the sanctions against that country remain as draconian as ever.

Further, the recent announcement by the Obama administration of plans to go to Congress to raise monies for the anti-Assad opposition, confirm the on-going stratagem of attempting to permanently cut off the supply routes from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The demarcation between 'friendly' and 'hostile' nations in the Middle Eastern and North African world is long established regardless of administration, although the most overt expression given to a long term plan remains the document formulated by the neo-Conservative Project for the New American Century (PNAC) in the 1990s.

This called for the systematic overthrow of a select number of regimes adjudged to be hostile to the "interests and values" of the United States.

The removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq formed the initial phase and this was to be followed by countries including Sudan, Libya and Syria, with Iran serving as the finale.

While the neo-Conservative influence on the administration of George W. Bush favoured intervention using the direct resources of the United States military, the present administration favours the path of effecting destabilisation through a technique of supporting a cast of dissidents involved in the prosecution of asymmetric warfare.

These belligerents ironically have tended to consist of Sunni extremists cut out of the same cloth as al-Qaeda; of which ISIS is.

Is ISIS the latest actor on a stage involving militarized Islamist groups who have done the bidding of the United States; effectively functioning as what has been cynically termed a foreign legion of America?

There is evidence pointing to the answer being firmly in the affirmative.

As is well documented, the United States through its Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) supported the Mujahedin during its guerrilla campaign against the forces of the Soviet Union when they occupied Afghanistan.

Prior to this, the United States had developed a complex but enduring relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood which dated back to the 1950s during the Eisenhower-era. The aim was largely to influence the brotherhood in the context of containing the spread of communism.

Among the band of kindred Islamists waging the anti-Soviet insurgency with huge inputs of United States funding and training was Osama Bin Laden who of course later formed al-Qaeda.

The protestations by official CIA historians that aid was only directed at indigenous Afghan insurgents is reminiscent of the disingenuous distinction postulated in the present Syrian crisis between so-called 'moderate' and 'extremist' elements of the militias opposing Bashar Assad.

In any case, both native Afghan and foreign fighters shared the same Islamist sentiments. While they were fighting for nationalistic reasons as well as for Islamic aims which were to remove the foreign and 'atheist' invader from Afghan soil, they were also unknowingly fighting to fulfil an American foreign policy agenda; namely that of weakening the Cold War-era Soviet foe.

The attack of September 11th 2001 to which responsibility was affixed on Bin Laden's group has not precluded a resumption of similar mutually beneficial relationships.

A "re-configuration" of American foreign policy priorities according to the Pulitzer award winning writer Seymour Hirsch occurred about five years later during the second tenure of the administration of President George W. Bush. This involved aiding pro-Saudi Sunni militants in the Lebanon against the Iranian supported Shia militia group, Hezbollah.

With the dawning of the so-called 'Arab Spring', protests against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi transmogrified into a full blown insurrection in the city of Benghazi from where militant Islamists including the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group emerged to fight pitched battles against Gaddafi's forces until he was overthrown.

This would not have been possible but for the use of NATO's airpower as well as the logistical and instructional help such as that provided by the special forces of the United Kingdom.

The United States aided by its NATO allies were again involved in fomenting a military opposition against Bashar Assad's government in Syria. And as confirmed in June of 2013 by the former foreign minister of France, Roland Dumas, this intervention was conceived and prepared for at least two years in advance of the commencement of the insurgency which developed a few months after what appeared to be genuine protests occurred in cities such as Damascus and Aleppo.

The rebels were given staging posts in the US-allied surrounding nations of Turkey and Jordan to serve as training quarters and to mount raids.

And as reported by both the UK *Daily Telegraph* and the *New York Times* in March of last year, a large cache of arms and equipment was airlifted to the rebels in a transaction co-ordinated by the CIA and paid for by the Saudis.

But who are the Syrian rebels and what ideological underpinnings do they have?

During the early period of the uprising, much reference was made to an organisation with the designation of 'Free Syrian Army'. The background to this 'body' suggested that it had a unified command structure with a solid amount of numbers which would continue to grow as it would absorb an envisaged amount of defections from the army of Assad.

The germ of the FSA was created by a Syrian army colonel defector who, along with a number of commanders and foot soldiers, was based at Apaydin Camp in Turkey.

Despite headlined press reports of assassinations and defections of several high-level military officers, this scenario failed to materialise. Indeed, a compelling argument was made with little or no disputation that the Free Syrian Army did not exist and has never come into existence.

Instead, the name was used in reference to a range of anti-government militias fighting in different regions of Syria. Most appear to have a Salafist agenda and cannot be objectively described as being 'secular' or 'moderate'. Prominent among them are the Islamic movement of Ahara Al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, Suqour al-Sham Brigade, Liwa al-Twhid and Liwa al-Yarmouk.

Indeed, a report by the *Times of Israel* in June of 2014 quotes the Israeli Defence Force's head of Military Intelligence Research and Analysis Division as estimating that over eighty percent of the opposition fighters "have a clear Islamist agenda".

After the initial barrage of reports on the FSA, the genuinely powerhouse opponents to Assad's regime began to be acknowledged in the Western press. These militias composed largely of foreigners included the Jabhat al-Nusra Front and ISIS; both well-funded and more effective than the local ones.

It is hard not to conclude that weapons earmarked for rebels under the auspices of the CIA and Saudis would get into the hands of the Islamist groups, along with the benefits of the training they have received.

It is a scenario which was painted by Michael J. Morell, a former deputy CIA director who in a CBS interview stated that the battlefield effectiveness of the Islamist factions drew the so-called moderates to their camps. In his words:

Because they're so good at fighting the Syrians, some of the moderate members of the opposition joined forces with them.

A proxy war of the sort fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union has been apparent for some time, and the United States is at the heart of it. It would appear that the United States is pliant to the goal of a fragmentation of the Middle East, although, of course, such a policy has never been publicly averred to.

Nonetheless, some have referred to a map prepared by a retired army colonel of the United States War Academy and which was published in the *Armed Forces Journal* in June of 2006 as evidence of a US-NATO objective of reconstituting the map of the Middle East.

Among the significant alterations to the Sykes-Picot agreement which created the modern nation states of the Middle East as we know them today are an Arab Shia state, a Sunni state and a Free Kurdistan being carved out of Iraq with the Kurdish state acquiring territory from Syria, Turkey and Iran.

Balkanisation has clearly been at the heart of the policy of assuring the survival of Israel. Indeed, it was a pre-condition of the emergence of the Zionist state that the Ottoman Empire be broken up and that the succeeding power in the region of Palestine, the British, would then take the steps which would lead to the establishment of what was initially termed a Jewish homeland.

Early Israeli policy under its first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, was geared towards bolstering the power of the Christian community in the Lebanon. It involved employing cynical strategies aimed at fomenting inter-communal strife among the Christian and Muslim groups in that country and even a plan to acquire territory up to the Litani River.

Indeed, the diaries of Moshe Sharett, an Israeli premier during the 1950s record Moshe Dayan declaring that Israel needed a Christian military officer to promulgate a Christian state which would then cede Lebanon south of the Litani River to Israel.

Both Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann, the early Zionist leader, had proposed this northern boundary in an early map depicting a state of Israel which was presented to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference after the First World War.

The strategy of balkanisation in the Arab and Muslim world has a simple rationale. Israel has always been wary of the emergence of any nation from these lands which is nationalist in outlook, that possess a high degree of social cohesion along with an economic and military capacity which could be directed against it.

While Gamal Nasser's Egypt and his Pan-Arabist philosophy presented the earliest visible form of what Israel perceived to be an existential threat before destroying it in the war of 1967; Ben-Gurion's vehement opposition to Charles de Gaulle's decision to grant Algeria independence provided ample proof of this permanent quality of sensitivity.

After Nasser, Saddam Hussein's Iraq emerged as the threat, and following the 2003 invasion, Iran is viewed as the pre-eminent Muslim nation which poses the greatest menace.

When in the early part of 2003 the Bush administration was preparing for the invasion of Iraq, the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon called on the Americans to also "disarm Iran, Libya and Syria".

This long time strategy is encapsulated within a policy document produced in 1982 by Oded Yinon, a journalist who had once been attached to Israel's foreign ministry.

Formally titled *A Strategy for Israel in the Nineteen Eighties* the 'Yinon Plan' is predicated on Israel achieving regional military and economic hegemony while working towards the division of its neighbours into ethnic and sectarian based mini-states.

The "far reaching opportunities" referred to in the document alluded to the range of weaknesses and stress points in the various countries on its borders and further afield which could be exploited by Israel so as to ensure their weakening and eventual fracture. These included religious, ethnic and sectarian rivalries as well as economic grievances among the population.

Iraq was a priority with the desired outcome being a three-state division into Kurdish, Sunni and Shite states. Egypt would in the best scenario be split into "geographically distinct

regions” encompassing a Coptic Christian state and a range of other Muslim states while Syria was identified as been essentially vulnerable because it “is fundamentally no different from Lebanon except in the strong military regime which rules it”.

For Yinon, Lebanon formed the template for the fracture of Arab states and as the paper continued:

Syria will fall apart in accordance with its ethnic and religious structure, into several states such as in present day Lebanon, so that there will be a Shi’ite Alawi state along its coast, a Sunni state in the Aleppo area, another Sunni state in Damascus hostile to its northern neighbour and the Druzes will set up a state, maybe even in our Golan, and certainly in the Hauran and in northern Jordan.

Such a state of affairs Yinon was convinced would serve as “the guarantee for peace and stability in the area in the long run”.

While Yinon’s work has often been quoted in recent years in relation to the contemporary wars in the region, it is not the only document of record offering an authentic account of such a strategy being at the heart of Israeli strategic policy.

For instance, Livia Rokach’s *Israel’s Sacred Terrorism* published in 1980 relates Moshe Sharett’s diary recollections of the machinations of both David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan during the 1950s in regard to a range of tactics and policies designed to acquire territory as well as to sow the seeds of discord within Arab nations.

An updated version of this formula forms the explicit rationale underlying what is known as the ‘Clean Break Document’.

In 1996, *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm* was produced during the first premiership of Benjamin Netanyahu by the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, an Israeli political think tank.

Led by Richard Perle, a key contributor to the aforementioned Project for the New American Century, the document put forward the argument that Israel should renounce all intentions towards achieving a comprehensive peace settlement with Arab nations and instead should work together with Turkey and Jordan to “contain, destabilize and roll-back” those states which pose as threats to all three.

And as with the PNAC document, Syria features as a state in regard to which Israeli policy should be geared towards “weakening, controlling and even rolling back”.

The means by which such destabilisation and containment would occur were not always explicitly addressed in the paper, but in practical terms it is clear that these goals are effected through a panoply of methods including Israel’s use of direct military action, its support for actors in proxy wars, and its use of the military resources of the United States through the huge influence wielded in that country by the Israel-Jewish lobby.

There is of course sensitivity attached to the terminology used in this regard and a debate in regards to the true scope of power American Jewish groups possess in terms of influencing United States foreign policy.

Yet the war declared on Saddam’s Iraq, the effects of which have led to the present crisis

involving ISIS and the threat of a permanent dismemberment, was influenced by the likes of the aforementioned Richard Perle, as well as Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith.

All are designated as neo-conservative in political outlook and were signatories to a letter written by members of PNAC to the incumbent President Bill Clinton calling for the military overthrow of the government of Saddam Hussein.

The Israeli state lies at the heart of any serious analysis of the reasons why America declared war on Saddam's Iraq as well as the later war manufactured by external powers in Syria.

In the year before the US attack on Iraq, the *Guardian* newspaper quoted the retired US Four-Star General Wesley Clark as saying that the so-called 'hawks' within the Bush administration who were lobbying for the war had been doing so well before the events of September 11th 2001 and privately acknowledged that the regime of Saddam Hussein did not pose a threat to America.

"But", said Clark, "they are afraid at some point he might decide if he had a nuclear weapon to use it against Israel."

Carl Bernstein, the veteran journalist and himself Jewish when referring to what he termed the "insane war" in Iraq, asserted in 2013 that it had been started by what he described as "Jewish neo-cons who wanted to remake the world (for Israel)".

The 'reconfiguration' of American policy as alluded to by Seymour Hersh has at its heart the state of Israel. According to Hersh:

The Saudi government, with Washington's approval, would provide funds and logistical aid to weaken the government of President Bashar Assad of Syria. The Israelis believe that putting such pressure on the Assad government will make it more conciliatory and open to negotiations.

In a continuation of his revelation of the preconception of the anti-Assad revolt, Roland Dumas provided the following:

In the region (i.e. the Middle East) it is important to know that this Syrian regime has a very anti-Israeli stance...and I have this from the former Israeli prime minister who told me "we'll try to get on with our neighbours, but those who don't agree with us will be destroyed".

The pretence of Israeli non-involvement in the present war in Syria or even its purported interest in maintaining the status quo with Assad remaining in power is belied by actions and pronouncements.

A report last year in *Debka*, a website staffed by Israeli journalists providing news on intelligence and security issues, revealed that senior IDF officers had criticised Moshe Ya'alon, the defence minister for misleading the Knesset when he gave an estimate that President Assad's forces controlled far less territory than it actually did and as a consequence, the Israeli armed forces were acting on the basis of inaccurate intelligence.

"Erroneous assessments...must lead to faulty decision-making" the report concluded.

An explicit statement from a government insider concerning Israel's attitude toward the Assad government came from Michael Oren last September. He said the following to the *Jerusalem Post* when leaving his post as Israeli ambassador to the United States:

The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc. That is a position we had well before the outbreak of hostilities in Syria. With the outbreak of hostilities we continued to want Assad to go.

Publicly disclosed operations such as those involving the bombing of pro-Assad storage depots and convoys claimed to be part of a logistical trail leading to Hezbollah in Lebanon, while portrayed as surgical in nature were likely made with the overall desire of weakening Assad's forces in his campaign against the insurgents.

For instance, in June of 2014, when a missile fired from Syrian territory killed an Israeli citizen on the Golan Heights, the Israeli Air Force responded by mounting sorties on nine positions belonging to the Syrian Army including a regional command centre.

This mission was undertaken, a *Times of Israel* report noted, despite the fact that "some Israeli (intelligence) experts said the area from which the anti-tank rocket was fired is under the control of Syrian rebels, not the Assad regime".

The present crisis generated by the gains of ISIS in Iraq and speculation as to whether the United States should intervene on the side of the Maliki government revealed the age long thinking and strategy of Israel's leaders and policymakers.

Speaking on NBC TV's *Meet the Press* in June, Benjamin Netanyahu's stated that "We must weaken both". "Both" of course was referring to the Sunni and Shia divide.

When your enemies are fighting each other, don't strengthen either of them, weaken both.

Furthermore, Netanyahu has recently called for the establishment of a Kurdish state.

But the conceptualisation of a reformatted Middle East is not solely the concern of the Americans and the Israelis. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has for long harboured ambitions to be the undisputed leader of the Arab and Muslim world, and to this end battled with the secular, pan-Arab philosophy as espoused by Gamal Abdel Nasser for the soul of the Arabs, and, in more recent times, it is contending with the Shi'ite bastion of Iran for regional influence.

Saudi Arabia along with its Gulf emirate neighbours, most notably Qatar, have been involved in the financing and organising of the revolts against the secular regimes of Colonel Gaddafi and President Assad, and the stripe of the beneficiaries such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, the Jabhat al-Nusra Brigade and ISIS is clearly Islamist.

It is a history which goes back some time and includes providing funds to the Mujahedin in Afghanistan in the 1980s which many historians would argue provided the germ for the development of al Qaeda and now ISIS which is a more extreme offshoot of the former.

But quite apart from pinpointing the instances of the documented funding of groups such as al-Nusra and ISIS is the responsibility arguably borne by the Saudi state for the rise of

Islamic extremism in modern times.

The pivotal moment in history, according to the case compellingly put by the Middle East affairs journalist Yaroslav Trofimov, was the siege of Mecca in 1979. On November the 20th, which was the first day of a new Muslim century, a large group of gunmen numbering in the hundreds seized control of Mecca's Grand Mosque, the holiest shrine in Islam.

Led by a preacher named Juhayman al Uteybi, the insurgents declared that the Mahdi or "redeemer of Islam" had arrived in the form of one Mohammed Abdullah al-Qahtani.

The insurgents also had the objective of overthrowing the House of Saud on the grounds that they had compromised the strict tenets of the Wahhabi creed originally imposed on the country after it had been formed by Muhammad Ibn Saud.

The grievance stemmed largely from the policy of Westernization and amongst several demands, Uteybi's insurgents called for the expulsion of Westerners, the abolition of television and the ending of education for women.

The two-week siege was ended after the Saudis obtained the blessing of Wahhabi clerics to storm the Mosque with the aid of French Special Forces and flush out the rebels.

But this came at a price. The Saudis clamped down in areas where 'liberalisation' had strayed such as the media and the school curriculum.

The decision was also made at the behest of the powerful fundamentalist clerics for the Saudis to pump money into the coffers of Sunni missionary organisations to spread of the ideas of the Wahhabi strain in Islamic universities and madrassas around the Muslim world. This purist brand of Islam lays particular focus on Jihadist sentiment.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan provided the opportunity for both the United States and Saudi Arabia to tap into the Saudis rededication to Wahhabism.

President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, saw in the Soviet move a chance to exploit outrage in the Muslim world, and the Saudis, following a fatwa declared by Abdelaziz Bin Baz, later the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, provided funding for the local Mujahidin as well as the bands of non-Afghan Jihadis who became the template for the contemporary multi-national Jihadis operating in both Syria and Iraq.

The aforementioned airlift of arms from the Balkans at the direction of the CIA which was paid for by the Saudis follows a mutually agreeable pattern for both nations.

A key player in Saudi strategy in its power play with Iran and the manipulation of Islamist militias in both Iraq and Syria has been Prince Bander Bin Saud, until recently the chief of Saudi intelligence as well as the head of the Saudi National Security Council.

So far as funding ISIS is concerned, there are reports that Prince Abdul Rahman Faisal, a son of the late King Faisal and a graduate of Sandhurst Royal Military College, serves as the conduit through which Saudi policy is driven and that he even influences the tactics of the group.

The prince is the brother of Prince Saud al Faisal, long-time foreign minister and Prince Turki al Faisal, ambassador to the UK and the US. However, this specific allegation has yet to be

officially corroborated.

One clue as to the inclinations of the Saudi state towards this marauding army of homicidal Jihadists may have been their issuing of a statement calling on the United States not to begin a bombing campaign in ISIS.

The Iraqi government has publically accused the Saudis of supporting ISIS and Prime Minister Maliki has saddled them with the responsibility for what he describes as the “crimes that may qualify as genocide: the spilling of Iraqi blood, the destruction of the Iraqi state institutions and historic religious sites”.

Aside from the sectarian-ideological motivations which lie behind the decision to attempt to unseat the Assad regime in Syria is one with a specifically economic dimension.

This relates to the decision of the Assad government to reject a proposed pipeline project through which natural gas would be pumped from Qatar to Turkey via Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria.

The reason Assad is said to have turned down the plan is that such a pipeline, which by extension would be able to supply European markets, would undermine the interests of Syria’s ally Russia which is the premier supplier of natural gas to Europe.

Instead, he pursued an alternative pipeline project which would emanate from Iran and run to Syria via Iraq.

This would explain the *volte force* on the part of the purportedly neutral Turk’s after initially cultivating cordial relations with Assad. Turkey cherishes the idea of serving as what has been described as the “ultimate energy bridge between east and west.”

It also explains Turkey’s use of a crucial natural resource as a weapon of specific retaliation and one that it will continue to use as a source of leverage in his dealings with Assad in Syria and the Iraqi government of Maliki: water.

This increasingly globally scarce resource in regard to which the Turks sit on one of the world’s largest reserves has of course formed a very underplayed yet significant backdrop to a number of conflicts including the seizure of the West Bank by Israel in 1967 and the overthrown of Gaddafi in 2011.

In May of 2014, the Turkish government cut off the water supply to the River Euphrates having started a process of a gradual reduction in the pumping of the river. It has led to a drastic shrinkage in the water levels of the man-made Lake Assad and is causing hardship to communities.

The rationale for the United States overseeing a sectarian based war in Syria and Iraq also has a basis in terms of accessing the natural resources of the Middle East on which the West remains reliant for its energy needs.

The need to foment such conflict; what in fact was described as a “long war” was bluntly put in a United States Army funded report by the RAND Corporation in 2008.

Entitled, *Unfolding the Future of the Long War: Motivations, Prospects and Implications for the U.S. Army*, the paper crucially identifies the geographic area of proven oil reserves as

coinciding with what it terms as “the powerbase of the Salafi-jihadist network”.

“This”, it continues, “creates a linkage between oil supplies and the long war that is not easily broken or simply characterized”.

The following more detailed excerpt explains how sectarian fault lines can be exploited in order to serve the interests of the West:

Divide and Rule focuses on exploiting fault lines between the various Salafi-jihadist groups to turn them against each other and dissipate their energy on internal conflicts. This strategy relies heavily on covert action, information operations (IO), unconventional warfare and support to indigenous security forces...the United States and its local allies could use the nationalist jihadists to launch proxy IO campaigns to discredit the transnational jihadists in the eyes of the local populace...US leaders could also choose to capitalize on the ‘Sustained Shia-Sunni Conflict’ trajectory by taking the side of the conservative Sunni regimes against Shi’ite empowerment movements in against the Muslim world...possibly supporting authoritative Sunni governments against a continuingly hostile Iran.

The report is clear about the need for the United States to simultaneously shore up the regimes which it classifies as ‘friendly’ to its interests such as Egypt, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia while working to weaken the influence of Iran; a strategy which it admits could serve to strengthen Jihadi groups, but which at the same time would bog them down in sectarian conflicts that would divert their energies from targeting the West:

One of the oddities of this long war trajectory is that it may actually reduce the al-Qaeda threat to US interests in the short term. The upsurge in Shia identity and confidence seen here would certainly cause serious concern in the Salafi-jihadist community in the Muslim world, including the senior leadership of al-Qaeda. As a result, it is very likely that al-Qaeda might focus its efforts on targeting Iranian interests throughout the Middle East and Persian Gulf while simultaneously cutting back on anti-American and anti-Western operations.

The document is certainly prescient so far as developments in terms of the Syrian uprising and the tumult in Iraq are concerned.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the fomenting of sectarian antagonism in order to fulfil an objective for the United States is not new to the region; a specific example being the use made of Shi’ite death squads made up of personnel recruited from militias such as the Badhr Organisation and the Mahdi Army to nullify a Sunni-led insurgency which had been claiming the lives of a great many American soldiers.

Thus the bolstering of Islamist groups such as the al-Nusra Brigade and later ISIS in a series of pre-conceived US military intelligence operations that are pursuant to America’s long-term geo-strategic interests is not merely plausible but is actual reality.

It fits into reports during the early stages of the Syrian conflict of claims that British and French military advisers were stationed at the borders of Syria and offering Syrian rebels as well as prospective insurgents including those arriving from abroad military training.

The existence of training camps run by NATO officials and well as by former US Special Forces mercenaries who operate private security consultancies in the Gulf has been alluded to in reports via the mainstream press including the German *Der Spiegel*.

In March of 2013, it reported that around 200 men had received training over the previous three months in Jordan and that the Americans planned to train a total of 1,200 members of the Free Syrian Army in two camps; one in the south and the other in the eastern part of the country.

While unsure as to whether the American trainers were serving US Army personnel or were working under the auspices of private firms, the magazine did note that some organisers wore service uniforms.

A report by the British *Guardian* newspaper, also in March 2013, confirmed the presence of US, British and French military advisers who were giving Syrian rebels what was termed “logistical and other advice in some form”.

While the article claimed that such training was been given to elements described as being “secular” so that an effective military militia would serve as a bulwark against Islamic extremist brigades, such a claim cannot be taken at face value.

The report alluded to the presence of CIA-led training camps in deeper locations within Jordan, and just how the Western operatives can distinguish between those who on the one hand are “secular” and those who on the other are “Islamist” remains unclear.

Given what is known about US policy via the RAND report and the actions of NATO in aiding Salafists in the Libyan uprising against Colonel Gaddafi, such professed distinctions are likely disingenuous especially when the accepted view is that the overwhelming majority of Syrian and foreign insurgents view the fight against the ‘apostate’ Alawite government of Assad as a Sunni crusade.

And so far as the training of ISIS is concerned, several news outlets are disseminating claims from Jordanian officials that members of ISIS were among those insurgents who received training from Western military advisers.

Even if it was accepted that prospective insurgents were not specifically coloured by an ideological allegiance to militias bearing an overtly Islamist agenda, and they were being readied to serve in the ranks of the putative Free Syrian Army, it is quite clear that as argued above, such an entity is non-existent.

After all its purported commander, General Salim Idris, whose organisation represented the supposed counter-weight to the Al Nusra Brigade and ISIS, relocated to Qatar in February 2014, his right hand man to Sweden and the number three figure is apparently residing in the Netherlands.

It is also more likely the case that a person nominally trained as a vetted FSA candidate guerrilla would leave for one of the better funded Islamist groups who offer their fighters more remuneration thanks to the largesse of wealthy donors from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait.

All of this is done with the apparent acquiescence of the United States and is in line with the thinking behind the report conducted by the RAND Corporation.

What also falls into sync with the series of rationales behind that report is the role played by former American internees in conflicts involving Islamist insurgents.

Many of these figures, incarcerated in the context of the so-called 'War on Terror', did not turn to the business of perpetuating acts of terror against Western military or civilian targets but involved themselves in insurrections which happened to be mutually beneficial to the Islamist causes and the United States.

Consider for instance the case of Abu Sufian bin Qumu. Qumu was renditioned from Pakistan to Camp Guantanamo Bay sometime after the NATO conquest of Afghanistan. He was released from US custody despite the conclusion of analysts that he represented a "medium to high risk, as he is likely to pose a threat to the US, its interests and its allies".

He was transferred to a Libyan jail in 2007 at the time when the US and its allies were cooperating with the Gaddafi regime in a policy aimed at containing Islamists but released in 2010 under an amnesty.

However, when the insurrection against the Gaddafi regime commenced in 2011, Qumu, in the words of the *New York Times* article in April of that year had somewhat perversely become "a U.S. ally of sorts".

Another Libyan figure Abdelhakim Bel Hadj, like Qumu was renditioned by the United States government and under the auspices of the British MI6 was placed in the detention regime of the security services of the Gaddafi regime.

As with Qumu, he was released under the 2010 amnesty by the Libyan government but joined the militias which with the help of NATO overthrew Gaddafi.

The head of ISIS and proclaimed caliph of the declared Islamic State, Baghdadi, was himself held in US detention between 2004 and 2009 at Camp Bucca in Iraq.

He, like the others, represents the 're-direction of energies' thesis postulated in the context of the "long war" predicted by the aforementioned paper.

It might be going too far without any incontrovertible evidence to suggest that men such as Qumu, Bel Hadj and Baghdadi are double agents 'turned' by US intelligence during their periods of detention.

But it is worth noting that that the dark arts as practised by intelligence agencies including that of NATO military intelligence in its Cold War-era manipulations of terrorist organisations of the extreme political Left and Right in Italy are capable of refinement and readjustment.

During that period, the techniques of infiltrating the leadership positions of political terror groups and steering them toward pursuing certain course of actions, as detailed in the infamous manual produced by Yves Guerin-Serac's Aginter Press, were successfully practised.

These Islamist figures have effectively had 'presented' to them a series of conflicts which have been tailor-made to assure the active participation of men of their ideological disposition.

The emergence of ISIS, barbaric acts and medieval-like edicts including the announcing of the institution of the *dhimmi* system notwithstanding, plays towards the prescribed US agenda in promoting its short and long-term goals.

It is also not unconnected with the turning of the tide gains made in the Syrian conflict by the forces loyal to President Assad and their foreign allies, namely Russia, as well as their co-denominational brethren from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Lebanese Hezbollah.

The war against Assad has defied the expectation that his minority-led government would be toppled in a short period of time as had happened with the Gaddafi regime.

The covert strategies devised by General Qassem Suleimani, the head of the Quds Force which is often described as been analogous to a combined CIA and Special Forces, has succeeded in stabilising the a situation which for a time was looking very dire from the perspective of the Assad regime.

The shoring up of this 'Axis of Resistance' against America and its Middle East allies, most notably, the Sunni powers, has been critical given the high stakes suggested by these words in a speech delivered by an Iranian cleric:

If we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran.

The stabilization of the Syrian front has been interpreted as a defeat by the Sunni powers and the surgent ISIS in Iraq presents an opportunity for the Americans in its continuing quest to weaken Iran.

After all, bombing ISIS targets in Iraq could conceivably lead to bombing parts of Syria under the pretext that such operations are being directed at ISIS. It could provide a back door opportunity to carry out the bombing of Assad's forces which in the wake of the chemical attack at Ghouta last August had been the intended course of action.

The motivation behind the calls by made by 'hawks such as senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham for the United States to bomb ISIS likely matches this.

These men after all must be aware of the overwhelmingly Islamist stripe of the vast majority of rebels fighting in Syria who were the eventual beneficiaries of the monies released by the US Congress in bills which both have strenuously championed.

This support, including their calls for President Obama to bomb and weaken the military capability of the Assad government last August, is designed to create the circumstances which would lead to his overthrow and the creation of a vacuum which, as happened in Libya, can only be filled by those who would be chosen by the likes of the al-Nusra Brigade and ISIS.

Yet, the policymakers and the engineers of the covert operations enabling the continuation of this 'Long War' must have in their calculations the possibility, even inevitability, of what is termed 'blowback'.

This is the suspected backdrop to the murder by Islamists of American personnel at the Benghazi 'consulate' which allegedly served as a conduit for the shipment of weapons to anti-Assad jihadis via Turkey.

For some time now, security officials from the Western European nations whose radicalised Muslim citizens are participants in the wars in Syria and Iraq have warned that returning jihadis would pose significant threats to peace and order.

President Obama himself admitted in June that the spread of ISIS-led conflicts to neighbouring states could pose a “medium to long-term threat” to the United States.

The sponsors of the ISIS such as Saudi Arabia could also be imperilling their long-term survival.

Like a frankensteinian creation, an independent and emboldened Islamic State with pretensions to controlling a Caliphate which does not recognise national borders would not stop at Iraq and Syria but could attempt to overthrow the Saudi regime on the basis that the Caliph is by Islamic tradition the designated Custodian of the two holiest mosques in Islam: the Al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and the Al-Masjid al-Nabawi in Medina.

Certainly the threat to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan appears to be the more immediate. A video posted on Youtube in April of 2014 described King Abdullah as “despotic” and a “worshipper of the English” and vowed to “slaughter” him.

While President Obama has in August of 2014 finally caved into pressure to order air strikes against ISIS positions, sight must not be lost of the greater picture; that of a ‘Great Game’ and a ‘Long War’ in which the United States is bound to continue its long-term strategy of protecting what it perceives as its national interests including maintaining its access to the natural resources of the region.

Its continuation was evident in Obama’s recent request for \$500 dollars from the US Congress to train the so-called “Syrian Opposition”. According to the *Washington Post*, “money for the assistance would expand a CIA covert operation’s training program”.

Developments within the context of this long-term foreign policy objective continue to present obstacles and also opportunities for the United States to exercise leverage.

So even if the recent gains of ISIS were not deliberately manufactured by Washington’s covert arm, it nonetheless provides an opportunity for the United States to put pressure on Prime Minister Maliki who the Americans view as being largely compliant to the dictates of Tehran and even to effect his removal in favour of someone who would follow the American line more willingly.

Some analysts suspect that the United States does exercise an undisclosed covert influence on ISIS; with even the suggestion that they are directed at field level by Western mercenaries or Special Forces embedded within their ranks much in the manner as members of Britain’s Special Forces were among the rebels who overthrew Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi.

And that because the Americans created the political structures presently governing Iraq including the supply of military weapons, that they are effectively controlling both actors in the crisis.

If this is the truth or at least close to the truth, it is fulfilling the template of the “long war” outlined in the RAND Corporation’s policy document. The United States will then seek to ‘manage’ this situation for as long as it can.

The ability of outsiders to effect instability of the Middle East owes much to the arbitrary border demarcations of imperial draughtsmen as represented by the Sykes-Picot agreement, the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia, the miscellaneous tribal affiliations

of its peoples along with the relative economic and environmental fortunes of its sub-regions.

Oded Yinon was being far from off-handed when pointing out in his paper that the Arab Muslim world was “astonishingly self-destructive”.

The latent fault lines cutting across the swathe of lands from North Africa to the Persian Gulf have been exploited by non-Arabs who have enabled the Arab nations to be willing accomplices in the coups, insurrections and wars which have brought havoc.

Very few can fail to see that the present crisis as being causally linked to the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein by a war of aggression waged by the administration of George W. Bush which was based on a false premise.

And as General Sir Michael Rose, a retired British soldier put it earlier this year, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair is self-deluded and “remains in complete denial over the disaster he inflicted not only on the people of Iraq, but also on many millions throughout the Middle East as a result of the 2003 invasion”.

Further, despite the protestations of Richard Perle made last month about the use of the term ‘neo-cons’ as what he emotively described as a “hateful” word directed at Jewish Americans, the evidence clearly demonstrates that the invasion had at the heart of the motivation of its principal proponents the destruction of an Arab state which presented a modicum of a military threat to the regional hegemony of the state of Israel.

It is also disingenuous to deny the fragmenting of Iraq as a state, whether by peaceful or strife-ridden circumstances as been the inevitable consequence of the invasion.

Few who understand the historical foundations of the policy of the Zionist state cannot fail to appreciate the requirement that its survival has always been predicated on the weakening and balkanization of its neighbours.

Also, few who are aware of the policy agenda of the United States in promoting and ‘managing’ sectarian conflict as a means of assuring its continued access to the natural resources of the Middle East will fall into a constricted analysis of ISIS as a stand-alone phenomenon unrelated to the cynical quality which underlies American strategy in the region.

It is but merely one troublesome episode within a wider saga; that of a twenty-first century version of the “Great Game”.

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