

Past and Present Islamist, Democratic and Nazi International Brigades

By [Prof. James Petras](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

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Image: Professor James Petras

The Islamic State (IS) has become a magnet for international brigades, drawing over 30,000 fighters from 5 continents and 86 countries to their war in Iraq and Syria.

While the international brigades are part of a global movement, most of the volunteers come from two-dozen countries, mainly in the Middle East, Maghreb, Western Europe, Russia and Central Asia.

Most Islamist internationalists are paid a salary to fight and engage in police functions within IS-occupied regions.

This essay will identify the principle sources of recruitment of Islamist internationalists and the reasons underlying their commitment. We will also contrast and compare IS internationalists to the earlier international brigades fighting for the Spanish Republic against fascists in the 1930's; fascist internationalists fighting for the Nazis against the USSR in the 1940's; and the democratic internationalists in the 1970's who joined the Sandinista revolution against the Somoza dictatorship.

Comparing IS to Past Internationalists

The IS 'volunteers' most closely resemble the Nazi internationalists in the substance and style of their politics. Both fused rabid nationalism and religion in their fight against 'godless atheism and communism', as was the case of the Ukrainian volunteers who collaborated with the Nazi armies invading the USSR. IS uses similar slogans in its attacks against *secular* Syria and *Westernized* Iraq. Both the Nazi volunteers and IS fighters are financed by established rightwing regimes: in the past by Hitler's Germany and today by Saudi Arabia, the US and Turkey.

In contrast the international brigades that fought for the Spanish Republic were mostly secular democrats, socialists and communists who received some arms from the USSR and limited financial aid from leftist individuals and organizations in the Western capitalist democracies.

The internationalists who went to Nicaragua to join with the Sandinista struggle against the Somoza dictatorship were mostly Latin Americans, with a sprinkling of Europeans and North Americans. Most of the volunteers were from Central America (El Salvador, Panama and Costa Rica) as well as political refugees who had fled the brutal military takeovers in Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. The conflict pitted internationalists who were anti-imperialist, democrats, socialists and supporters of liberation theology against a US-backed oligarchical

dictatorship monopolizing the land, wealth and power.

The Sandinistas, like the IS, opposed US dominance but clearly differ in their tactics, allies and strategic goals. The internationalist volunteers in Nicaragua fought for a secular democratic socialist government with close ties to socialist Cuba. IS retains ideological links and economic ties with the theocratic absolutist monarchy of Saudi Arabia and the authoritarian Islamist regime of Recep Erdogan of Turkey.

The IS internationalists engage in generalized terror, mass murder, and destruction of historic and symbolic sites in conquered towns, cities and villages to ensure conformity. Likewise the pro-Nazi internationalists in Ukraine and the Baltic States and elsewhere had imposed a regime of terror, murdering members of trade unions, cooperatives, as well as Jewish and leftist organizations.

A major difference between the Nazi collaborators and Islamist volunteers is found in the areas of action. Most of the Nazi internationalists engaged in terrorist activity overseas against their republican, democratic and communist enemies. In contrast IS volunteers rotate from their home base to Iraq-Syria and return. According to one study up to 39% of the European jihadist internationalists go back to their home countries. Many continue to support and practice Islamist armed struggle. In contrast, the Spanish Republican and Nicaraguan internationalists of the 1930's and 1970's returned home to pursue democratic and socialist politics via elections and mass movements, where possible, and by arms where necessary (like in El Salvador).

In summary, whereas the internationalism of the earlier periods in the 20th Century reflected the polarization between left and right, between Hitlerian fascism and varieties of socialism; today *left internationalism* is in decline and *rightwing Islamist internationalism* is on the rise.

According to recent studies the number of IS volunteers has doubled between 2014 and 2015. From January - June 2015 over 30,000 overseas volunteers joined IS fighters compared to 12,000 fighters a year earlier (Independent 8/12/15).

The Growth Centers of IS Internationalists

The number of IS volunteers from Western Europe has doubled over the past year, to over 5,000. (In contrast the number from North America remains around 280 jihadists.) The number of IS volunteers from Russia and Central Asia have increased 300% reaching 4,700, of which 2,400 are Russians (mostly Chechens and Dagestanis) and 2,100 are Turks and Kazaks.

The key centers of IS growth are found in the Middle East, where 8,240 fighters joined the terrorist army in Syria and Iraq. Other "hot spots" are the Gulf States, with 2,500 Saudis and more than 6,000 from the Maghreb, mostly Tunisians.

IS internationalists are increasing in direct proportion to the increasing military intervention of US, EU and Russia. The reasons for joining IS vary by country and cannot be subsumed under a single cause, whether it is religion, ethnicity, class, imperialism or economic remuneration.

In many ways IS has become a magnet for global grievance-holders in a deteriorating

world. Force and violence coming from the dominant Western countries has provoked a reciprocal response from a great variety of uprooted, deracinated and educated classes. The IS war against the West is, in part a convergence, of Saudi billionaires experiencing vicarious *holy wars* and underworld semi-literate fighters from Europe's urban ghettos.

The IS is a multi-national and national army, ruling by fiat, bound by a rigid hierarchical structure and fundamentalist ideology, which is transmitted through the use of sophisticated high-tech social media. Like the Israeli State, IS harnesses billionaires and high-tech innovations to primitive, tribal ethno-religious beliefs of a 'superior people'. IS draws economic support from various, apparently contradictory, forces. Financial backing from oil sales via Turkey to Israel; billions from the Saudi regime at war with Shia and secular regimes and movements; arms from the US and EU seeking 'regime change' in Bashar Al-Assad's Syrian government.

IS and Washington's 'Coalition of 60'

Washington's claim that it leads a *coalition of 60 governments against IS* is deeply flawed because it is based on verbal commitments from regimes, which, in practice, are *actually working with the IS*. Moreover, for many crucial US 'partners' the fight against IS is a pretext for other political-military priorities.

A prime example is Turkey, which attacks and bombs the secular Kurds in Syria and Northern Iraq under the pretext of fighting IS. Ankara supplies 'volunteers', supplies arms, training, financing and sanctuaries to the IS. Erdogan's *Turkomen proxies* in Syria fight against Kurds as well as the government of Bashar Al-Assad.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States provide 'volunteers', finances, religious ideology and arms to IS and other extremists groups to fight and defeat the Shia regime in Iraq, the secular government in Syria and the Houthis movement in Yemen - all the while claiming to be a member of the US coalition against IS.

Israel, which claims to oppose IS and Islamist terrorism, provides cross border medical care to IS fighters wounded in southern Syria and bombs the Syrian armed forces as they pursue IS fighters.

Worst of all, most of the IS arms come from the US, either captured from retreating Iraqi armies or received directly from so-called "*moderate rebels*" who either sell, or join the jihadis and hand over their US arms to IS.

Like the Nazi international brigades, IS internationalists have powerful state backers who wage phony wars in a game of mutual manipulation. The Saudis export their domestic extremists to Syria and Iraq to safeguard the absolutist monarchy. The US and EU allowed IS volunteers to travel to Syria to overthrow the Bashar Al Assad government - and then exploit the returnees' links to terrorism, to strengthen the domestic police state. Turkey promotes IS to prevent an autonomous Kurdish state in northern Syria and to expand its southern border by annexing a band of Syrian territory.

Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, which were invited by the Damascus government to fight against IS, are seriously engaged in the war against IS. They fear an IS conquest of Syria will result in a launch-pad for terrorists returning to their countries. Chechens and Dagestani fighters among the IS jihadis receive arms, training and financing and are

committed to return to Russia to apply the terror they learned in Syria and Iraq.

Turkey's aggression and attack against Russia - including the shooting down of a Russian jet which had been bombing IS oil convoys heading for Turkey and Ankara's proxies among the Turkomen - is indicative of its powerful links to IS.

Conclusion

The formal and informal international organization of Islamist extremists, led and inspired by IS, has encouraged tens of thousands of volunteers from dozens of countries in 5 continents. These international brigades are recruited on the basis of various appeals - not merely religious, but with personal, political and monetary appeals. Many go abroad to Syria and Iraq to secure training with the intention of returning to engage in armed attacks in their country of origin. Their strength is not so much in their numbers or commitments but in the powerful support they receive from major powers in the region and the world. If it was not for Turkey, they would not be able to enter Syria nor receive pay or arms because of IS oil sales via the Erdogan connection. The volunteers would not advance in battle if it were not for US arms captured or bought from Iraqi arms depots and those supplied by the US to its Syrian 'moderate rebels'. Wounded IS volunteers would not return to battle if it were not for Israeli medical care.

Many IS volunteers would not fight under the banner of Wahhabi extremism if the Saudi Arabians did not pay their salaries and buy their arms. In other words, IS "*internationalism*" is largely state-sponsored, dependent on the interests and strategic needs of global and regional powers.

In contrast the internationalists who fought on the side of the Spanish democratic Republic (1936-39) against fascist Franco and great regional powers (Germany and Italy) were not supported by the US, Great Britain, France etc.

Likewise, the internationalists, who fought with the Nicaraguan Sandinistas against the Somoza dictatorship, fought against the Great Powers - mainly the US - and received marginal support from Cuba and Panama.

The questions of internationalism and the justice of the cause are largely determined by the nature of the class composition, ideology and backers of their struggle.

The internationalism of the current IS led movement is backed by regional and global imperial powers intent on using international volunteers as cannon fodder for their imperial goals, which include destroying independent governments, establishing client regimes, seizing economic resources and expanding territory in order to establish military bases surrounding global and regional rivals, Russia, Iran and China.

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