

What's Behind the President's ISIS Campaign? The Path of Empire and America's Core Interests

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Listening to President Obama [describe](#) his intention to “degrade and destroy” ISIS, he named a number of reasons for launching yet another war in Iraq. Gazing out at the nation through the eye of a camera lens, he intoned, “In a region that has known so much bloodshed, these terrorists are unique in their brutality. They execute captured prisoners. They kill children. They enslave, rape, and force women into marriage. They threatened a religious minority with genocide. In acts of barbarism, they took the lives of two American journalists – Jim Foley and Steven Sotloff.”

Forgive me for saying so, but moral indignity usually rings hollow in the mouth of an American president. Unfortunately, ISIS is not unique in its brutality. Saudi Arabia [beheaded](#) at least eight people in August, for “crimes” as absurd to the Western mind as the ISIS crime of being an “infidel.” Saudi Arabia’s puritanical Wahhabi legal apparatus ends lives in the same brutal fashion for such offenses as adultery and, by my troth, sorcery. Yet the Saudis are a permanent American ally, and seem nearly incapable of offending Washington.

Even some of the so-called moderates that the U.S. plans to arm and train—*once more*—have also beheaded many of their ISIS enemies of late. But that’s just the highlight reel. Since the inception of their rebellion, they’ve evidently been shelling Damascus neighborhoods without regard for who lives there. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that the citizens of Syria are punished for their errant ways. For bothering to show up at the polls in June. For stupidly choosing to overwhelmingly re-elect Bashar al-Assad. Mortars packed with nails and shards of glass rattle through their cafes and thoroughfares. A proper discipline for a people that don’t pick the right candidate. Just ask the Palestinians that voted for Hamas. Here’s a first-hand [look](#) at some of the non-ISIS “moderates” we’re thinking of arming.

That covers Obama’s claim about ISIS’ “unique” form of brutality and the charge of executing prisoners. And this is setting aside the military [regime](#) the U.S. backs in Egypt that snuffed out the dying embers of the Arab Spring in Cairo and banned the Muslim Brotherhood with a severity to match the Mubarak regime of which it is a remnant.

The president also noted that, “We cannot allow these communities to be driven from their ancient homelands,” referring to Christians and Yazidis, both religious minorities that are said to have been threatened with genocide. In fact, the Catholic Church has called, “slow motion genocide.” This is a fair statement and ISIS cruelty against infidel minorities is awful enough, but one can’t help but notice the parallel in U.S. support for what Israeli historian

Illan Pappé calls the “incremental genocide” of the Palestinian people by the Israeli state. The monopoly of media support for that conflict seemed to finally exhibit cracks of dissent in the margins of the latest IDF savagery in Gaza, in which dozens of families were extinguished entire, and more than 2,000 people died, including women and children, in a chilling display of indiscriminate brutality.

You couldn’t say the U.S. is especially vexed by torture, bombings and extrajudicial killings, or other vile assaults on defenseless populations. After all, we have, in the president’s words, “tortured some folks.” And although this is surely deeply regrettable to the president, it isn’t enough of a crime in his view to prosecute the perpetrators. It may have then come as no surprise when we learned that this is what former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki practiced his entire time in office, backed with little reservation by America. The American insistence on his removal and the formation of the kind of inclusive government Maliki was supposed to form is likely too little, too late to hold the country together, not that a European construct should be forcibly preserved in any event.

And this is not even to mention the general failure of the administration’s much ballyhooed plan to arm and train the Free Syrian Army—even if via the Gulf states—which at one point was said to include a shabby alliance of some 1200 “moderate” groups (swiftly steamrolled by ISIS). It was—and still is—practically impossible for the White House to guarantee that these groups were moderate Muslims, and many are ideologically similar to ISIS or the radical Wahabbism exported from Saudi Arabia. According to [sources](#) within Jordan, the U.S. trained dozens of Syrian rebels there that already were or later joined ISIS, thinking they were moderates anxious to unseat the Assad regime and usher in some sort of secular, Western-guided government. Think again.

In the end, freshly minted U.S. arms wound up in ISIS inventories, either sold to them by the moderates themselves, or captured in conquests of Syrian rebels and Iraqi Armies. So why reboot a strategy that proved so utterly bootless in its first iteration? Is it because this time the Pentagon will directly train and arm the rebels? Twenty five billion dollars [worth](#) of best practices did little to stanch ISIS’s roll through northern Iraq, where the soldiers who absorbed all that training abandoned their weapons, shed their uniforms, and fled for the hills. The CIA has actually been [training](#) rebels in Jordan for some time, apparently to no avail.

However, the White House claims that it has some 40 nations willing to participate to one degree or another in rolling back ISIS. This is a far larger Rolodex of participants than George Bush’s shoddy “coalition of the willing” more than a decade ago. The coalition of the willing that Obama has cobbled together, however robust, may be [little](#) more than a headcount of obsequious foreign ministers. Turkey doesn’t want to see dozens of its diplomats slaughtered on YouTube. Sunnis may interpret U.S. intervention as just more support for Shia causes. Qatar and the Kingdom will likely see a degraded ISIS as a boon to the reviled Assad regime. Yet properly ending the ISIS threat would require Turkey to close its border to them, coordinating air strikes with Tehranian foot soldiers in Iraq, and communicating with Assad on countering ISIS in eastern Syria. And convincing Gulf monarchies to quit their Wahhabi evangelism. None of these things is likely to happen, largely because we’ve so dramatically demonized both Iranian and Syrian governments, and seem so beholden to Saudi oil. Such an about face would require more than a series of blandishments from Obama.

In short, the president's stated reason for renewing American interventionism in the Middle East is what it has always been—terrorism. But surely Obama has observed that terrorist jihadism has metastasized by several orders of magnitude since 9/11, owing not least to American interventions—from Kabul to Baghdad to arming raiders of Aleppo—which have destabilized strong if corrupt governments, unearthed simmering sectarian enmities, and even unwittingly trained and armed the very jihadists that became ISIS.

The United States has other objectives. Terrorism is a useful cover story that posits a righteous cause for American action. To be sure, ISIS is infected by an ideology of puritanical intolerance and hatred, but they are hardly a threat to the might and power of the U.S. What threat there is likely stems from the citizens of some 74 nations that now populate ISIS, many of them American. Repatriating—or not—these radicals will require serious vetting by Homeland Security, but not missiles by the Pentagon. A better, if flawed, argument for war can be made on pure ROI grounds—that the U.S. ought not to stand idly by and watch the dismemberment of a nation it spent the better half of a trillion dollars attempt to cleanse of “insurgents” and usher into a free-market fantasyland.

Not So Ulterior Motives

So, then, what is the president's underlying motive for another intervention in Iraq? He actually told us in his speech. His reasons were contained in the often-overlooked promise, “to use force against anyone who threatens America's core interests.” This has been publicly stated at least since the Clinton administration wrote it into its defense policy. It is surprisingly that more scrutiny hasn't been given to this regular concession, since it openly implies that we may be fighting for access to natural resources, if not simply to secure the homeland. But it has been privately the guiding light of American foreign policy since its inception, not the “security of the American people”, which Obama disingenuously claims is his first priority as Commander in Chief. Were this his priority, he would have long ago seriously addressed two of the leading instigators of jihadism mentioned above.

To clarify key drivers of U.S. foreign policy, dissidents like Noam Chomsky have repeatedly pointed out that one need only look at post-war planning documents, notably the “Petroleum Policy of the United States.” Drafted in 1944, the barely veiled imperial license which characterizes this policy paper insists on “the preservation of the absolute position presently obtaining, and therefore vigilant protection of existing concessions in United States hands *coupled with insistence upon the Open Door principle of equal opportunity for United States companies in new areas*” (italics mine).

You could hardly say it more plainly, although Woodrow Wilson did just that a few decades earlier when he articulated the all-encompassing policy of which the petroleum credo is but an article: “Since trade ignores national boundaries and the manufacturer insists on having the world as a market, the flag of his nation must follow him, and the doors of the nations which are closed against him must be battered down. Concessions obtained by financiers must be safeguarded by ministers of state, *even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process*. Colonies must be obtained or planted, in order that no useful corner of the world may be overlooked or left unused” (italics mine). One might merely add that now the tendency is rather for the flag to precede the manufacturer, not follow him.

Moving from strategy to tactics, the administration's plan may be to use an attempt to blunt the ISIS advance as cover for the overthrow of Assad, an long-lived objective of the U.S. blueprint for the region, memorably shown to a stunned Wesley Clark, who later leaked

the [plan](#) to the press. Seven countries in five years. You could never fault a neocon for lack of ambition. Obama's cold feet, Kerry's gaffe, and Sergey Lavrov's quick thinking prevented Syrian regime change about a year ago. No matter. The timeline was adjusted. A new pretext would soon emerge. Indeed it has.

All this is not to say that Barack Obama lacks a soul. Unless he is a sociopath of special dimensions, he probably recoils tamely at the sight of a beheading, like the rest of Westerners well trained in stomaching scenes and descriptions of far-flung violence. He probably believes ISIS is an even more lethal incarnation of jihad than al-Qaeda. And he'd be right. But the reasons he, or any U.S. president, for that matter, give for our actions are not the real reasons for those actions. They may be secondary considerations at best. In a democratic society, or one premised on an assumption of democracy, the cynical self-interest of the state must always be cloaked in some noble purpose. Otherwise, the population, not itself thinking in geo-strategic terms, would clamor for peace. Even if the population doesn't wholly digest the proffered cause, it must be handed that moral palliative by which it might rationalize actions taken in its name. In this sense, the interplay between president and people is a tango, a two-step in which each partner plays a part. And Obama, for his part, is pinioned by forces far greater than himself. Perhaps having seen this political eventuality from afar, he developed his incrementalism early in his career, the perfect rationale for placating vested interests while attempting modest reforms that change little but indicate intent. That tired look in the president's eyes? He's tired of being played for the pawn that he is and has agreed to be, and he hasn't the courage to defy the powers that elected him. Corporate. Networked. Disguised. Ubiquitous. Unsentimental.

Beware the military-industrial complex, cried a post-war Cassandra. But that prophecy came too late. The die was already cast. Now every president feels the pinch of private power. Those of a liberal frame of mind may believe we are much advanced in our sensibilities since the era of shameless colonialism. Yes, our rhetoric has been revised. We now conduct "humanitarian interventions" and are compelled to violence by our high-flown "Responsibility to Protect," (which may indeed have their proper use in a liberal internationalist policy). Yet, as Patrick Cockburn [noted](#), "...intervention in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 turned out to be very similar to imperial takeover in the 19th century." The priorities haven't changed, just their wording. And we have subtly turned the Bretton Woods institutions on their heads, refashioning them as mechanism of control and extraction, rather than the stepladders of independence they were invented to be. This meant the need for boots on the ground was no longer of pre-requisite of colonialism. Debt disciplines a nation better than rifles.

Socialists might suggest that the Wilson quote makes clear the primacy of capitalist priorities in American foreign policy. Doors must be flung open to American capital. And capitalism, if anything, has become even more radicalized since Wilson's day. We live in an age of extremes, ISIS at one pole and Collateralized Debt Obligations at the other. My money's on the CDOs. They have better weapons. Financial WMDs. And this radicalism, borne in part by the emergence of Asian rivals—the kind neocon Paul Wolfowitz warned we could not permit—is why well-intentioned calls for diplomacy—and globally broadcast proclamations, like the Pope's avowal that "war is madness"—will finally fall on deaf ears, rendered mute by the din of an approaching delta of drones. If you live in the Levant, cover your ears. You're in the path of empire.

Post Script: Neither Syria or Iran attended Monday's meeting of world leaders in Paris to discuss rolling back ISIS.

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