



The Pentagon's Plan to Convert the Islamic State Caliphate into a US-Backed Syrian Rebel Puppet Regime

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Washington is preparing to mount a campaign to transfer control of Syrian territory currently held by ISIS to rebels who operate under US influence, forming a rebel redoubt from which US proxies can continue to wage war on Damascus, and establishing the foundation of a US puppet state in Syria.

A key to US strategy is the artificial division of the conflict into a part to be resolved by military means, involving ISIS, and a part to be resolved through a political settlement, involving all other rebel formations. Nusra Front, the exception, is to be ignored, and rebranded. As Al-Qaeda's Syria franchise, it can hardly be embraced openly by the United States, though there is evidence of its being equipped covertly by the CIA.

The designation of non-ISIS rebels as parties to a political settlement follows the shibboleth that the conflict, apart from ISIS's role in it, cannot be resolved militarily. This may be true, but only because the non-ISIS rebels have been trained and armed by Western states and their regional allies and therefore have a military significance they would not otherwise possess. Damascus's early efforts to arrive at a political settlement by lifting restrictions on political liberties and amending the constitution went nowhere. This is because the goal of the armed opposition is the replacement of a secular non-sectarian state with one based on a conservative Sunni interpretation of the Qur'an, and because the military backing of powerful Western and regional states offers no incentive for militant Islamists to compromise. At the same time, the reality that the Ba'athist government in Damascus hangs on despite the powerful international forces arrayed against it, speaks volumes about the strong public support it commands. Its political survival, in the fifth year of an open multi-national war against it, and more than a decade after Washington launched a covert program of regime change aimed at purging Ba'athist ideology from the Syrian state [1], would not be possible in the face of widespread opposition from the Syrian public.



Photo Caption: US Special Forces are recruiting and equipping Sunni Arab fighters to capture Raqqa, the capital of ISIS's caliphate. Once captured, the territory will likely remain in the hands of the US surrogates and almost certainly won't be returned to the legitimate Syrian government. Instead, it will form the core of a US-puppet regime in Syria.

The objective of sharply distinguishing between ISIS and other rebel organizations is to legitimize a US-led campaign against the former, and to undermine the legitimacy of the Syrian-Iranian-Russian-Hezbollah effort to defend the Syrian state and its loyalists against all other rebel forces, namely, those backed by the US and its allies. We are to believe that it is perfectly reasonable for the US to wage war on the sectarian, terrorist, ISIS, but that Damascus must negotiate a peace with ISIS's sectarian, terrorist, ideological cousins.

It has been extensively reported in the leading US newspapers, and acknowledged by the US vice-president, that the Nusra Front is armed by US allies Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. The same newspapers also frequently refer to Western backing of other rebel groups. These groups have been variously described by leading US journalists as working with, enmeshed with, cooperating with, fighting alongside of, and operating under license to Al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise, and have been reported to share weapons with it [2]. Both Nusra and other non-ISIS rebel forces are ISIS's ideological cognates, sharing its ultra-conservative, Saudi-inspired Islamist ideology, but rejecting the idea that a caliphate is the only legitimate form of government. Efforts to arm non-ISIS rebels are coordinated, according to The New York Times, by the CIA. [3] Putting two and two together, if US regional allies are equipping the Nusra Front, and the CIA is coordinating their efforts, then the CIA is arming the Qaeda franchise in Syria, on top of the other rebel groups which operate alongside of it. This likely accounts for why the CIA program is covert, while a parallel \$500 million Pentagon program to train and equip rebels who had no ties to Al Qaeda, was not. That program was abandoned, after the Pentagon failed to recruit enough non-Qaeda aligned fighters. [4]

The Syrian government is asked to accept a political dialogue with non-ISIS rebels and to enter into cease-fire agreements with them, while at the same time the United States is to be left free to pursue, with its allies, a military campaign against ISIS—one that involves the

injection of Western special forces into Syrian territory and therefore an illegal violation of Syrian sovereignty. That campaign, which is now underway, involves several hundred Western military personnel operating on the ground to recruit and equip Sunni Arab fighters to capture territory in Syria that is now held by ISIS.

It would appear that the strategy has two goals.

- To expand Syrian territory under the control of US proxy forces by capturing territory currently held by ISIS. Once captured, it will be held by US proxies.
- To stop further gains by Syrian-Iranian-Russian and Hezbollah forces against US-backed Islamists by insisting on the cessation of hostilities against them and political dialogue.

As the Syrian government engages in fruitless talks with Western-backed Islamist militants, a US-controlled rebel redoubt will be established in eastern Syria, from which the war on Damascus will continue to be prosecuted. The dialogue is fruitless because the rebels, and their paymasters, are implacably opposed to compromise. Anyone who believes that Washington is honestly trying to foster a peace in Syria (except on its own terms, namely, only if Ba'athist ideology is irrevocably effaced from the halls of power in Damascus) is deluded. Imperialists, as Mao observed, do not lay down their butcher knives to become Buddhists.

In the meantime, Nusra Front will operate under a variety of different names. Indeed, it appears, given the extensive inter-penetration of Western-backed rebels with the Qaeda franchise in Syria, that it already does. This meshes with head of US intelligence James Clapper's admission that "moderate" means nothing more than "not ISIS" [5]; which is to say, it denotes nothing about a group's aims or methods, and serves the propaganda function of connoting "good." "Moderate" rebels, we are to understand, are "good" rebels, even though their aims and methods may be largely indistinguishable from those of ISIS and the Qaeda Syrian franchise they are enmeshed with.

The US can fight rebels, but the Syrian army must pursue a political settlement with them

"The White House," according to The Wall Street Journal, "has said a political resolution in Syria is ultimately required to resolve the conflict there and to defeat ISIS, which opposes the (government) of President Bashar al-Assad." [6] ISIS also opposes the Abadi government in Iraq, the Sisi dictatorship in Egypt, and the Saudi dictatorship on the Arabian Peninsula, but the White House isn't calling for a political resolution in these states. Doing so would open itself to criticism that it is counselling capitulation to terrorism, a stance it would never adopt in dealing with terrorist threats to itself or its puppets but is prepared to adopt to eliminate a government in Syria that, unlike the Iraqi, Egyptian and Saudi regimes, insists on freedom from Western domination.

Privileging local populations over US corporations is a form of lese-majesty against US global primacy. The Ba'athists' transgressions on the reigning hegemon's ideology of globalization, a by-word for Americanization, is confirmed in Assad's insistence that, "Syria is an independent state working for the interests of its people, rather than making the Syrian people work for the interests of the West." [7] The US State Department complains that Syria has "failed to join an increasingly interconnected global economy" and is aggrieved that "ideological reasons" continue to prevent the Assad government from liberalizing Syria's economy. The Wall Street Journal and Heritage Foundation lament that Damascus "dominates many areas of economic activity, and...marginalizes the private sector," while

the U.S. Library of Congress country study of Syria refers to “the socialist structure of the government and economy.” [8] The motto of the governing Ba’ath Party, unity (of the Arab nation), liberty (from foreign domination), and socialism, is light years from the motto Washington would prefer states emblazon on their banners. We embrace atomism, welcome foreign investment, apotheosize capitalism, and are open to US military bases on our territory, is more along the lines of a motto a good member of the “international community” is expected to adopt. You need know little more than the foregoing to understand why Washington insists that Assad and his fellow Ba’athists step down.

For counselling compromise with terrorists, Washington has not been lashed by criticism. Under other circumstances, it would be. But then, the United States has a complicated relationship with terrorism. Terrorism is the use of violence against civilians for political purposes. While Washington is one of the most vociferous opponents of the practice, it is also one of its most ardent practitioners. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, militarily insignificant cities, are egregious examples of terrorism on a grand scale. The terror bombings of German and Japanese civilians during WWII by conventional means, including the fire-bombings of Dresden, Hamburg and Tokyo, aimed at undermining civilian morale, are equally egregious examples of US terrorism in practice. NATO’s terror bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 is a more recent case.

U.S. Air Force Lt. General Michael Short’s explanation of the objectives of the 1999 U.S.-led NATO air war on the former Yugoslavia fits the definition of terrorism to a tee. “If you wake up in the morning and you have no power to your house and no gas to your stove and the bridge you take to work is down and will be lying in the Danube for the next 20 years, I think you begin to ask, ‘Hey, Slobo (a reference to the country’s leader at the time, Slobodan Milosevic)? How much more of this do we have to withstand?’” [9] The United States has also used terrorists to advance its foreign policy goals in Afghanistan against secular modernizers supported by the Soviet Union and in Cuba against the communist government in Havana, to name but two cases. Countless more could be adduced. On the other hand, Washington opposes terrorism strenuously when it is used against the United States. In this vein, ISIS is both a useful US foreign policy tool in weakening the Syrian state but at the same time an enemy in threatening the US-allied Abadi, Sisi and Saud regimes, and in challenging US domination of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Conquering the caliphate

US Special Forces are recruiting and equipping Sunni Arab fighters to capture Raqqa, the capital of ISIS’s caliphate. So far they’ve recruited 6,000 fighters, and about 12,000 are being vetted. [10] The Pentagon has dispatched 250 military personnel to Syria, augmenting 50 who were already there. US allies have also sent special operations forces to Syria, to do “exactly the same thing,” according to US defense secretary Ash Carter. [11]

The introduction of Western ground forces into Syria is an illegal violation of Syrian sovereignty. This has been pointed out by Damascus, Moscow and Tehran, but Western countries, whose state officials are in the habit of sanctimoniously delivering sermons on the rule of law, hypocritically ignore it whenever it suits their purposes. International law is a spider’s web in which to entangle the weak, while the strong merely push through it, their chauvinist and complaisant mass media glossing over the crime.

An ulterior motive

If the United States' only goal in waging war against ISIS was the organization's elimination, it would have seized the opportunity to coordinate with Russian forces once Moscow entered the fray, in order to multiply the force of the campaign against the hyper-sectarian Islamist organization, and to hasten its quietus. Instead, Washington let the opportunity pass. More importantly, it would have teamed up with the Syrian army, the single biggest force fighting ISIS.

ISIS cannot be eliminated by air power alone; ground forces are essential. And so, the United States has undertaken to train and equip Sunni Arab fighters to fill the role. The United States has disdained any cooperation with the Syrian army, even though it could readily defeat ISIS with the assistance of US air power. On the contrary, Washington has deliberately refrained from taking steps to weaken the notorious Sunni Arab terrorist group, hoping that continued pressure from the Al-Qaeda offshoot would etiolate the Syrian army and, as a consequence, pressure the Ba'athists in Damascus to step down. [12] That Washington hasn't taken the obvious route to the elimination of ISIS suggests that defeating the caliphate is not its primary goal. Instead, it has a higher objective and ulterior motive: the transfer of Syrian territory now in the hands of ISIS to biddable US surrogates.

US plan adumbrated

The Wall Street Journal sketched out how the United States will carry on its war against the Syrian state. [13] Reading between the lines, the war will be pursued under the guise of eliminating ISIS, and while this will be the immediate outcome of the war if the campaign is successful, the ultimate objective will be the conquest of Syrian territory held by the caliphate. The war will be pursued on the ground by Sunni Arab fighters trained and equipped by the special operations forces of the United States and its allies. US proxies on the ground—the Sunni Arab fighters recruited and equipped by the Pentagon—will capture territory currently held by ISIS, backed by US air strikes.

Once captured, the territory will remain in the hands of the US surrogates. It will not be returned to the legitimate Syrian government, a point that will be overlooked in the celebration of ISIS's defeat. Instead, it will become a base from which a continuing war will be waged against the pro-independence, secular, non-sectarian, socialist-oriented Syrian state. The conquered territory will be given a high-sounding name, likely conceived and vetted by a high-priced US PR firm, such as Free Syria or the Free Syrian Republic.

It will not, however, be free from US domination, or free to put the interests of the local population above those of Washington and Wall Street, or free to foster Arab unity, pursue socialism, or aid Palestinians in their quest for self-determination. It will, however, be free to fill the coffers of Western banks and corporations, free to buy arms from Western weapons manufacturers, free to invite the Pentagon to establish military bases on its territory, free to allow the State Department to meddle in its internal affairs, and free to accept as legitimate the Zionist conquest of Arab territory. In short, it will be free to surrender its sovereignty and join the US empire.

Notes:

1. Craig Whitlock, "US secretly backed Syrian opposition groups, cables released by Wikileaks show," The Washington Post, April 17, 2011.
2. Stephen Gowans, "US Plan B for Syria: Give Al-Qaeda More Powerful Weapons," what's left,

April 17, 2016.

3. Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo, "U.S. relies heavily on Saudi money to support Syrian rebels," The New York Times, January 23, 2016.

4. Robert Fisk, "David Cameron, there aren't 70,000 moderate fighters in Syria—and whoever heard of a moderate with a Kalashnikov anyway?" The Independent, November 29, 2015.

5. James Clapper: US Director of Intelligence:
<http://www.cfr.org/homeland-security/james-clapper-global-intelligence-challenges/p36195>

6. Carol E. Lee, "Political unrest tests U.S. influence in Iraq," The Wall Street Journal, May 2, 2016.

7. Stephen Gowans, "Syria, The View From The Other Side," what's left, June 22, 2013.

8. Stephen Gowans, "The 'Anti-Imperialist' Who Got Libya Wrong Serves Up The Same Failed Analysis on Syria," what's left, January 23, 2016.

9. "What this war is really about," The Globe and Mail, May 26, 1999.

10. Paul Sonne, "U.S. seeks Sunni forces to take militant hub," The Wall Street Journal, April 29, 2016.

11. Gordon Lubold and Adam Entous, "U.S. to send 250 additional military personnel to Syria," The Wall Street Journal, April 24, 2016.

12. Stephen Gowans, "What US Congress Researchers Reveal About Washington's Designs on Syria," what's left, February 9, 2016.

13. Paul Sonne and Julian E. Barnes, "U.S. Cites Better Intelligence for Stepped-Up Airstrikes on Islamic State," the Wall Street Journal, May 2, 2016.

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