



Counter-revolution in Syria invites US return to Iraq

Marcus Halaby Fri, 07/11/2014 - 14:52

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Lacking support, the Syrian revolution suffered a series of defeats, a consequence of which was the rise of the ISIS. Marcus Halaby examines the fallout of this development

One of the deceitful justifications given for the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was to prevent the spread of Al-Qaeda. Of course anyone who knew anything about the Ba'athist regime knew that there was no Al-Qaeda presence in Iraq at all. Today US President Barack Obama, elected with the promise to withdraw US troops from Iraq, is once again launching airstrikes on Al-Qaeda offshoot Islamic State, which even Osama bin Laden's successor Ayman al-Zawahiri has condemned for its sectarianism and brutal methods. Surely this must rank high among examples of the cunning of history or the law of unintended consequences.

The White House was taken completely by surprise when on 10 June, what was described as just a thousand or so fighters from ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (Greater Syria), took Iraq's second city Mosul with barely a shot being fired. Two Iraqi army divisions comprising nearly 30,000 soldiers fled, stripping off their uniforms and leaving their weapons behind. Half a million of Mosul's 1.5 million people fled the city, 300,000 taking refuge in the Kurdish autonomous zone nearby.

In the captured Mosul Airport, ISIS found several UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters and cargo planes. The treasure trove included more than \$466 million and a large quantity of gold bullion in the city's central bank.

ISIS forces and their allies rapidly headed south, taking Baiji and Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown, on 11 June. They were joined by ex-Baathist fighters from a number of organisations including the Naqshabandi Army, which is headed by Saddam Hussein's former deputy, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri.

On 21 June they took control of the important Al-Qa'im border crossing between Iraq and Syria, pushing out fighters from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Jabhat al-Nusra, the rival claimant to ISIS for the role of al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise. A week later on 29 June ISIS renamed itself the Islamic State (IS) and declared the territory it controlled to be a new Caliphate under the theological dictatorship of 'Caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Conspiracy theorists on the Counterpunch and Global Research websites put recent IS successes down to a US-Saudi plot to oust the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, and thus weaken Iranian influence in Iraq, Assad in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Certainly the US wants to get rid of al-Maliki, or force his party and the Shia establishment in Iraq into a coalition with Sunni forces. And it is possible too that the sudden collapse of the Iraqi army was in part a result of covert manoeuvres to get him to do so. But it has to be said, that if this was a 'plot', it has backfired spectacularly.

Having rejected direct military intervention in Syria, a project that the Obama administration was never enthusiastic about because it judged the US had no overriding interest there, the US also resolutely refused aid to the Syrian rebels. The reason they gave was that they could not ensure weapons delivered to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) or its allies would not fall into the hands of 'extremists' like the Islamic State and its 'official' Al-Qaeda rival Jabhat al-Nusra. However its allies in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, were actually sending arms and equipment to al-Nusra, and various millionaires from across the region were willing to fund IS too.

As a result the FSA and the groups of secular revolutionaries faced two murderous enemies, the Assad regime and the Jihadi Islamists. The parasitic dynasties and capitalists of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states used their largesse to establish hegemony over a large part of the Syrian opposition, the Islamic Front of Zahran Alloush being among the most visible.¹

Today the USA, to the dismay of Israel, finds itself forced into an undeclared alliance with the Iranian regime to restore the authority of the Iraqi government over the one-third of its national territory it has lost to IS and its proclaimed caliphate. In this endeavour, it has the open support of Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional arch-rival, and the somewhat less trumpeted aid of Iran's client regime in Syria, a vicious fascistic dictatorship battling for its survival, which has already conducted airstrikes of its own in the east of Iraq on behalf of Nouri al-Maliki's Shi'a sectarian Iraqi regime.²

One can only conclude that the anti-US 'Axis of Resistance', supported by gullible leftists and anti-imperialists, now includes the USA itself.³

In fact despite its left apologists, who present the Assad regime as an enemy of the Islamic State, and its Alawite-officered Syrian Arab Army as a guarantor of secularism and communal coexistence, the truth is that the Syrian regime's relations with the IS have thus far been those of a mutually beneficial non-aggression pact.

In Raqqah, the north-central Syrian city that is the Islamic State's stronghold, the one target that the Syrian air force has never bombed is IS's headquarters in the centre of the city, even as that same air force frequently drops barrel bombs on civilian targets, destroying whole neighbourhoods, and occasionally attacks the Islamic State's rivals, like the 'mainstream' Salafist militia Ahrar ash-Sham.⁴

This non-aggression pact's rationale is not too difficult to understand. Firstly the Assad regime needs to sell its small but significant oil supplies to the outside world to finance its war, and has happily bought it both from the Islamic State and from Jabhat al-Nusra, ensuring they are amongst the best armed and financed of its 'enemies'.

The other support IS brought it was 'moral', i.e. political and ideological. The Islamic State's barbaric acts provide the Assad regime with the means to terrify Syria's large ethnic and religious minorities, primarily the Christians and the Alawites, into support or tolerance of the regime. Assad has been able to use IS as the deluge in 'après moi, le deluge', just as Nouri al-Maliki has done in Iraq. But as Iraq shows, this is a game not without its dangers.

The Islamic State, a parasite and an enemy

The Assad regime's murderous policy, which has displaced up to a quarter of Syria's 23 million people in a war that has killed more than 200,000 in the last three years, easily puts into the shade the atrocities of the Islamic State and provides them with a steady stream of recruits from those frustrated with the failure of Syria's ill-armed and fragmented revolutionary forces to overthrow Assad. So much so that they are willing to join the ranks of an organisation despised by almost the entire spectrum of anti-Assad opinion as a parasite on and an enemy of the Syrian revolution.⁵

The growing enmity of Syria's genuinely revolutionary forces to the Islamic State is not difficult to understand. Originally IS and Jabhat al-Nusra played an important military role after their emergence in Syria's civil war, taking part alongside the FSA in the siege and capture of Menagh Air Base between August 2012 and August 2013.⁶

Most of the areas under their own direct control today were, however, originally liberated from the Assad regime not by themselves but by the FSA or by FSA-aligned formations. The Islamic State imposed itself on these areas some time afterwards, invariably alienating the population in the process, and obliging IS to fight an on-off struggle to maintain control over them against other forces with stronger roots in that same population.⁷

The most well known of these intermittent struggles has been the Kurdish versus jihadist conflict in the far north and northeast of the country. The People's Protection Units (YPG), resting on a Kurdish population whose national aspirations have largely been ignored both by the domestic Syrian armed opposition and by the civilian opposition in

exile, have borne the brunt of the struggle against this cancerous colonisation of Syria's liberated regions by a force that is frankly and unremittingly hostile to the democratic objectives of a revolution for which so many have given their lives.

In turn, this Kurdish versus jihadist struggle has been a major factor in preventing the Democratic Union Party (PYD), effectively the Syrian section of the Turkish-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), from finally burning its bridges with a regime that had tolerated its existence since Bashar al-Assad's father and predecessor, Hafez al-Assad, supported the PKK's armed struggle against the Turkish state in the 1980s.

This struggle has now extended to Iraq, where IS now fights Kurdish peshmerga guerrillas in a long-established Kurdish autonomous region that lies adjacent to the Islamic State's conquests in the region stretching from Mosul to Fallujah.⁸ This has brought with it the possibility that the Kurds, long imprisoned and divided by the borders between the failed and failing states in which they now live, may yet decide to assert their right to an independent nation-state once and for all.⁹

Imperialist intervention and imperialist non-intervention

The most instructive irony of all, however, is visible in the difference in behaviour of US imperialism and its allies when their fundamental interests are threatened – as they clearly are by the possible collapse and fragmentation of a major oil-producing state like Iraq¹⁰ – as compared to when they are not so threatened, as they were not in Syria.¹¹ While Barack Obama and Britain's David Cameron went through the pantomime of a debate in Congress and a vote in Parliament to cover their own hesitation after the Ghouta chemical attacks in August 2013, the sudden advance of a militia only a few thousand strong in Iraq in August 2014 has seen them act without any such displays of reverence for constitutional procedure.¹² Moreover, this time they have the impatient backing of Russian imperialism's clients in the region, as well as their own.¹³

This irony, perhaps, will be lost on the one-eyed 'anti-imperialists' who have raised the spectre of an imminent Western imperialist intervention to overthrow Assad (which constantly fails to actually materialise), while turning a blind eye to, or actually applauding the much more decisive Russian imperialist intervention, without which Assad would in all probability have been overthrown by the mass uprising of his people.

Indeed, for the many opponents of the Syrian revolution worldwide, both in mainstream bourgeois politics and on the international left, the Islamic State's triumphant return to Iraq after its heady growth and consolidation in Syria will probably be seen as a vindication. For those of a traditionally right wing and 'realist' bent, it will be seen as proof that Arabs (and indeed Muslims in general) are not 'ready for democracy?', that they always need a strongman, like a Saddam, an Assad or a Gaddafi, to keep them in order and prevent them from chopping each others' heads off – and keep them from posing a threat to the outside world.

Stalinist class-collaboration and pacifist illusions

For their mirror images on the left, who can share this racist standpoint only in heavily disguised secularist form, it will be seen as proof that the unarmed popular uprising against the 44-year-old Syrian Ba'athist dictatorship in March 2011 was always a 'Western conspiracy' against a 'resistance regime'. On the other hand for those who initially supported the Syrian uprising but who took fright when faced with its 'militarisation', represented by the formation of the FSA in late July 2011, civil war (as opposed to civil disobedience) could only ever lead to the uprising's co-option by the interested regional and international players on whom any military struggle in the region will to some extent be dependent.

Neither of these two apparently 'left wing' outlooks is appropriate for anyone who claims to be a revolutionary.

The former divides the world into 'imperialist' and 'anti-imperialist' camps, by which they mean pro- and anti-US/EU/Nato, as if the USA and its allies were the only imperialist powers on the planet. This ignores the fact that capitalism was restored in Russia and China in the 1990s, and that the military and economic legacies as 'great powers' inherited from the post-war era allowed them to become imperialist powers themselves, and they are now

contesting for a 'place in the sun' against the US 'hegemon'.

This 'camps' theory also proclaims that in semi-colonial regimes, like Venezuela, Iran and Syria, which today depend either economically, militarily or politically upon Russian and Chinese imperialism in order to defend themselves against Western imperialism, the working class should subordinate their struggles to the leaders of these so-called 'progressive' regimes.

Sprinkling 'anti-imperialist' holy water on these often abhorrent dictatorships, advocates of this outlook, ultimately derived from Stalinist 'camps theory', are obliged to identify themselves with these same regimes, not just against Western imperialism but also against uprisings by their own people and their own exploited classes, whose rebellion can be explained only by reference to the dark arts of Western intelligence agencies.

The latter outlook, by contrast, counsels 'peaceful' forms of struggle, as if these had not already been tried and found inadequate in the face of a brutal regime and vastly superior firepower. If you are only willing to support a revolution if it can win quickly and preferably without generating too much violence or bloodshed, then frankly you have no right to call yourself a revolutionary at all. Engels famously described a revolution as 'the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon.'

Like bourgeois diplomats and civil servants for whom a temporary setback for their own state's foreign policy is a lesser evil than the prospect of the 'uncertainty' that creates such panic in global financial markets, the thing that they dread above all is protracted conflict, in which the uncomfortable life-and-death decisions made by all the available protagonists fail to fit neatly into the preconceived schemas of those who have the luxury of not having to make such decisions.

The biggest irony for the partisans of this outlook, however, is that the revolutions that actually do fit their schemas are often enough the least complete, as was the case in Egypt, where the 'downfall of the regime' in 2011 took a mere 18 days and eight hundred deaths, only to reveal within two and a half years that 'the regime' continued to exist and was notching up death and imprisonments into the thousands.

And yet it is hardly an exaggeration to say that it could all have been very different.¹⁴ Only seven months ago, a clear majority of Syria's anti-Assad factions were united in trying to deal IS a blow from which it would not be able to recover.¹⁵ Even Jabhat al-Nusra, seeing which way the wind was blowing, was obliged to take part in this 'revolution within the revolution?', although it would not be long before it returned to the same parasitic behaviour exhibited by IS.

Even within the areas under IS's control, popular resistance has quickly exposed the limits of their ability to maintain their presence by arms alone.¹⁶ The threat posed by IS in turn has acted as a catalyst for the popular alliances that are necessary for the Syrian revolution's victory against the Assad regime, even where, as with the Kurds, these alliances have up until now been blocked by the bourgeois politics of the oppositional factions.¹⁷ The tragedy is that, like the Assad regime, IS can call upon support and reinforcements from outside its immediate theatre of operations, while the Syrian rebels have largely been abandoned by the outside world.¹⁸ But even despite this, the Syrian rebels have proved capable of holding up against the apparent odds.¹⁹

In northern Iraq's largest city Mosul, where IS was initially welcomed or at least tolerated by a Sunni population that had suffered bloody repression and discrimination at the hands of a 'Shi'a' regime, residents have also shown signs of civil disobedience, protecting their Christian neighbours much as their Syrian counterparts in Deir ez-Zor have tried to protect the Kurds.²⁰ The signs are that the initial tolerance that IS benefitted from in establishing its rule in Syria may prove to be even more short-lived in Iraq.²¹ It was politics, not battlefield prowess, that brought the Islamic State such a speedy victory in Mosul, and it is politics that will dispose of the fruits of that victory.

Revolution in Syria, and sectarian civil war in Iraq

IS's repulsive reputation is well deserved. As early as 2005, during Iraq's occupation-induced sectarian civil war, seven years before IS began its intervention into Syria's revolutionary civil war, revulsion at its methods and its

sectarianism was strong enough that it enabled the US occupation forces to gather together the so-called Sahwa (Awakening) movement to defeat it.

Numbering in the tens of thousands by 2008, this movement was largely composed of former anti-US Sunni fighters who were alienated by the takfiri encroachment (the sectarian practice of declaring members of other Muslim sects as apostates or heretics, who must be killed) and alarmed by the prospect of a Shi'a-dominated Iraq after the by then inevitable US withdrawal. In this way, the USA hoped to deal a blow to the remnants of the 'Sunni insurgency' against their rule, while also creating a "Sunni" counterweight to Nouri al-Maliki's Shi'a sectarian regime, in a classic act of 'divide and rule'.

The Sahwa movement's abandonment by the post-occupation Iraqi state following the US withdrawal, and the undisguised Shi'a sectarian rule that followed it must count as one major factor in the speedy collapse of the Iraqi army in Mosul and Tikrit in June 2014. There must be more than a few former Sahwa fighters today who now find themselves fighting on the same side as the takfiris of IS that the US-led occupation forces originally persuaded them to fight against between 2005 and 2009.

Nor have IS's actions softened in the meantime; if anything, its experience in Syria has hardened all of its worst features.²² Its genocidal hostility²³ to members of the Kurdish-speaking Yazidi sect²⁴ is entirely of a piece with its past behaviour in Syria. So too are its characteristic attempts to force Iraqi Christians either to convert, to pay a special tax as infidels, or to leave their homes.²⁵

Iraq's Kurds, Christians, Yazidis, Turkmens and every other ethnic and religious minority threatened by IS necessarily and legitimately resist IS encroachments onto their areas, as indeed do Iraqi secularists and the workers' movement.²⁶ And just as the Syrian rebels do, they have every right to obtain the arms needed to defend themselves from wherever they can find them: from Iran, from the Kurdish peshmerga, from the Iraqi state, from the Syrian rebels and even from the Americans and the Assad regime. Where else should they seek them?

We do not however, call for or support Obama's air strikes on Iraq or Syria, under the pretext that this is providing humanitarian assistance, let alone military intervention by US imperialism. We should similarly be opposed to any Iranian intervention with the same pretext.

Why? Because seven years of US occupation led not to security and safety but to a humanitarian catastrophe, with well over 100,000 deaths and massive violations of human rights (e.g. in Abu Ghraib prison).

Nor do we support the project of restoring Baghdad's authority in that large swathe of Iraq that it has lost or abandoned to IS. Even with Maliki removed²⁷ from office, his own personal usefulness²⁸ to US imperialism at an end, Haider al-Abadi's new government or any likely successor to it will still be both a source of sectarian bloodletting and an agent of outside powers.²⁹

Sectarian barbarism begets more sectarian barbarism

Just as in Syria, where it has been the Assad regime's actions that bear the primary responsibility for fuelling inter-communal violence, so too in Iraq, IS's shocking barbarism did not materialise out of thin air. Nor is it simply a natural product of salafi or takfiri distortions of Islam. Its most immediate cause has been the 2003 occupation of Iraq³⁰ during the Bush-Blair 'War on Terror', although one could extend it further back to the intentionally destabilising, sectarian division of power and privilege that British imperialism built into the Iraqi state from its very foundation in the aftermath of the defeat of the Ottomans in the First World War.

As one Syrian activist³¹ has pointed out, the 2003 war and occupation came after a decade of sanctions had killed a million Iraqis and forced 4 million from their homes, and itself involved the repression not just of political opposition to the occupation but also of the independent trade union movement that opposed the neoliberal policies that placed millions in penury. The occupation authorities dismantled not just military and civilian state institutions but even the education system; and the creation of a new political system that institutionalised sectarian political affiliations

produced, just as it ultimately did in its original form in Lebanon, a sectarian war between communally-based extremists on both sides that left an average of 3,000 dead every month.

The fact is that Iraq's Sunnis have every reason to fear the post-occupation Iraqi state and the pro-Iranian Shi'a militias on which it rests every bit as much Iraq's Shi'as and Iraq's minorities fear the Islamic State.³² Their barbarism is no less bad for the fact that no major global or regional power is using it as a pretext for intervention.³³ This time, however, the Iraqi state may not survive.³⁴ Even in the government-held regions, militias compete with official security forces to impose their own version of law and order, murdering sex workers and their clients³⁵ in broad daylight and detaining men from Sunni neighbourhoods who return to their families only as lifeless corpses.

Today, there is an ongoing revolutionary civil war in Syria, and a renewed sectarian war in Iraq. IS, which now rules over an ersatz 'Caliphate' in the space between these two failed states, has joined these two wars together in the most graphic way possible, in the process erasing the now rather blurry border between the two countries once drawn up by an Englishman called Sykes and a Frenchman named Picot.³⁶

Sooner or later both countries' wars will acquire the same character as each other. Either Syria's revolution will finally collapse into the pitiless war of all against all that its myopic detractors have claimed that it was from the outset, or forces will emerge in Iraq's sectarian war that, like the original mass movement against Syria's totalitarian dictatorship, set themselves the goal of overcoming the dynamic of mutual fear and paralysis by removing their ultimate causes: dictatorship, foreign occupation, and exploitation.

Precisely how IS is defeated – and by whom – will be a major factor in deciding which of these two eventualities actually materialises.

Why should an Iraq in which IS – or rather, its base of support in the Sunni population – has been 'pacified', i.e. terrorised by means of US air strikes, supported by an Iraqi army, Kurdish peshmerga and Shi'a sectarian militias, look any different to the Iraq that the USA supposedly left behind in 2009-10, in which a Sunni insurgency had just been 'pacified' by much the same alignment of forces?

IS itself may come and go – it has already gone through several incarnations and several changes of name since the US invasion that spawned it in 2003 – but the genuine grievances on which it was able to build will remain, and rematerialise time and time again.

Conversely, an alliance of popular forces with real roots in their respective populations, acting in defence of their homes and communities, could repeat in Iraq the experience of Deir ez-Zor and of the many other locales in Syria in which the revolutionaries have stood firm against IS's attempts to replace Assad's tyranny with its own. In this way, instead of a sectarian war in Iraq becoming a sectarian war in Syria, we could see the experience of a revolutionary war in Syria set the stage for a revolutionary struggle in Iraq.

This strategy will require people to advocate it – a party, to use a word that has become less fashionable in recent years – and such a party will have to base itself on the struggles and the material interests of the working class, the only force in society whose historic interests point it towards a world without privilege or exploitation. But no amount of good intentions will enable this outcome if it is US imperialism or its newly found Iranian allies that are the agents of IS's demise. We should oppose Obama's air strikes for precisely this reason.

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