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This War is Not Aimed at ISIS, But at Assad Destabilizing Syria

by DAN GLAZEBROOK

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Watching the debate in the British parliament last Thursday, over whether Britain should, yet again, launch aerial attacks against the long-suffering people of Iraq, it was striking just how much admission there was of the failure of Britain's policy in the region hitherto.

That ISIS have been emboldened, or even created, by the West's insistence on supporting the armed insurgency in Syria over the past three years – pouring money, weapons and training (including even in public relations) into the hands of fighters of all shades – was admitted again and again by MPs from all parties, as was the reality that it was precisely the dysfunctional state bequeathed by the occupation that had allowed ISIS to take root in Iraq. But those very same MPs then almost all went on to explain that would be voting ('reluctantly', 'with a heavy heart', etc etc etc) for the government's motion. The implicit argument was that, yes, we have been doing the wrong thing for the past three years (or past eleven years); but now we have a chance to put it right; indeed it is precisely *because* we helped create the 'beast' that we must now help to kill it.

Pretty much every British attack on the Middle East has been justified along the same lines. The bombardment of Libya was supposedly a recognition that Britain's treatment of Iraq –

occupation with ground forces – was counter-productive and bred resentment; ousting Gaddafi using Libyan (and Qatari) forces backed by airpower, therefore, was presented as somehow ‘overcoming’ the ‘mistakes’ of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. But that invasion itself had been presented at the time as the reversal of the previous, ‘mistaken’, British policy of supporting the region’s ‘dictators’ (this was the line used by Tony Blair every time it was pointed out that Britain had fully supported all of the supposed Iraqi crimes which Blair pointed to as vindication for his war). And Britain’s supposed support for Saddam Hussein during the 1980s (if encouraging a self-destructive war can be termed support) was itself, no doubt, presented as an enlightened move forward from the 1950s policy of trying to maintain a puppet king hand-picked by the British Foreign Office. Each twist and turn of British foreign policy is thus accompanied by an admission that we have been doing exactly the wrong thing up till now; but now we are doing the right thing; *that* interference was wrong, but *this* interference will put it right; *that* violence was a sin, but *this* violence will atone for it.

Except it won’t. And it won’t because, despite appearances, there *hasn’t* been any change of heart. In fact, there has *never* been a genuine self-criticism on the part of the British foreign policy establishment; the self-criticisms come about *only* in order to justify the next bout of bloodletting; they are never presented as they should be, as the tragic footnotes to a disaster, but only as the preamble to a new bloody chapter. The policy, after all, has never changed. It has always had the same goal – to stifle any potential of independent development. When the British-backed king could no longer hold back the forces calling for Iraq’s modernisation, Britain sought to reduce the influence of the communists by supporting a coup by the right-wing of the Ba’ath party. When the Ba’ath party itself ended up overseeing a successful modernisation of the country in the 1970s, Britain did all it could to encourage a war with Iran, ensuring that the wealth of both countries was squandered, their development pushed back by decades. Within three years of that war ending, Britain was involved in an aerial attack that devastated the country’s infrastructure, followed by a crippling sanctions regime the like of which the world had never before seen, which killed half a million children, and caused 3 successive senior UN officials to resign in protest at what they described as a policy of genocide. Just as the ‘legal’ justification for sanctions was about to run out – with the country almost entirely disarmed – came the invasion of 2003, which ended up imposing a constitution which institutionalised sectarianism and created a political system in which ‘democracy’ was reduced to competing promises to maximise favours to your sect at the expense of everybody else. The result was that the Sunni minority were rendered the implacable enemies of the government, leading to the disaster now unfolding. In every case, with every intervention, the result has been surprisingly consistent – that Iraq’s ability to realise its enormous potential has been stymied and set back. The supposed Dasmascene conversions by British policy makers turn out, on closer inspection, to be mere tactical shifts. Our MPs would do well to admit these continuities instead of constantly attempting to delude their constituents, and themselves, into thinking that the leopard has changed its spots.

And so to today. This war – presented as a new war against a new enemy, Isis – is in fact a continuation of the three-year old war against the Syrian state – itself a continuation of the centuries-old war against development and independence amongst the states of North Africa and West Asia, and indeed the entire global South.

The fact that so many of the MPs in the debate who voiced support for airstrikes, did so with an admission that they will almost certainly fail to destroy ISIS, is one clue that this war is not what it purports to be. In fact, the British government is both unable and unwilling to destroy ISIS.

Unable, because, as all serious military analysts agree, airstrikes alone cannot destroy an organisation like ISIS. As Patrick Cockburn pointed out shortly before the Commons debate, “Though air strikes will inflict casualties on Isis in Syria and Iraq, they will not be enough to defeat the group and may not even contain it.” ISIS’s continued progress towards Baghdad this week was a particularly swift vindication of the point. But it is the reluctance on the part of the British and US governments to coordinate their efforts with the forces which have actually been fighting against ISIS and its allies for years – that is to say Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah – which really demonstrates their insincerity on the issue.

Why do they not pursue a more effective strategy? Because the defeat of ISIS is not really their goal. ISIS and its friends have played right into the hands of British foreign policy for the past three years, acting as the vanguard in the Anglo-American proxy war of attrition against the Syrian state. But the use of sectarian militias as tools of foreign policy has a much longer pedigree in Britain. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (Al Qaeda’s Libyan affiliate) were hosted in London for decades before finally being unleashed against the Libyan state in March 2011, their services to their imperial masters including a botched MI6-led assassination attempt against Gaddafi in 1996. The Muslim Brotherhood were cultivated by British intelligence as a means of undermining Nasser’s pan-Arab socialism in Egypt in the 1960s, but had already been used against the progressive liberal movement of the interwar years, the Wafd. Most infamously, the self-proclaimed ‘mujahadeen’ in Afghanistan – which ultimately spawned both Al Qaeda and the Taliban – were given full support by Britain in their war against the Soviet Union and the progressive forces of Afghanistan. This is all without mentioning the now notorious integration of loyalist death squads into the British army’s war against Irish republicanism in the 1970s and 80s under the auspices of the SAS’ s ‘Forces Research Unit’ – claimed by the British authorities for years to be nothing more than the invention of paranoid fantasists, until it was categorically exposed in one of the British government’s own inquiries.

There is no reason to believe Britain has given up on this strategy of using sectarian death squads as an instrument of foreign policy; indeed in an age of relative economic decline for the world’s ‘former’ colonial powers, it is likely to increase in importance. With economic cutbacks leading inexorably to a corresponding relative decline in military capacity, the strategy of exploiting sectarian gangs for use against independent powers is likely not just to continue – but to grow.

So what *will* this war achieve? Firstly, it will have a number of effects on ISIS itself. As Cockburn has pointed out, it will probably force ISIS to “revert to guerrilla warfare which has been its tactic in Iraq since the US started bombing there on 8 August”, noting that “in the past few days Isis fighters have killed 40 Iraqi soldiers with suicide bombs and captured another 68 as well as over-running an army garrison west of Baghdad.” In other words, it will ensure that ISIS continues in its role as a straightforward terror gang, rather than evolving into some kind of semi-governmental body administering territory. And this suits the British government, which wants to see them fully focused on destabilisation, rather than being diverted into any kind of ‘state-building’, however half-baked. Airstrikes may, as it were, succeed in turning *IS* – a proto-

state formation – back into *ISIS* – a sectarian death squad, the role originally mapped out for them by imperial planners.

However, there will be one crucial difference to the *ISIS* of pre-April 2011 and the *ISIS* that is now emerging under Western aerial bombardment. This time, they will benefit from a credibility that they have so far been denied – the credibility of being able to pose as an anti-Western, anti-imperialist force. Because, over the past three years, it has been so obvious they and the Western countries have been on the same side, singing from the same ‘Assad must go’ songsheet, they have not really been able to do this – until now. This will undoubtedly bring them more recruits, more support, and more funding. But an even bigger shot in the arm will come from the image of strength that they will gain from *surviving* airstrikes. Nothing succeeds like success, it is said, and the image of endurance and perseverance apparently ‘against the odds’ will gain them an appeal formerly beyond their reach.

And what of the ‘war against Assad’? Far from this having been eclipsed by the ‘war against Isis’, it is at its foundation. Having been thwarted from bombing Syria in August 2013 by Syrian, Russian, Chinese and Iranian steadfastness – and subsequent parliamentary nervousness in both the US and Britain – the West are now indeed bombing Syria. David Cameron, for his part, cleverly designed his motion only to refer to airstrikes against Iraq – ensuring that Syria was largely kept out of the debate – but insisted that he could expand the operation into Syria *without* parliamentary approval once it was underway. We are now being told that the West are being ‘forced’ to intervene in Syria because Assad failed to defeat *ISIS*, but the truth is precisely the opposite – the West is now in Syria because *ISIS* and its friends – the recipients of so much lavish diplomatic, financial and military support from the West and its allies these past three years – have failed to defeat *Assad*. The US – alongside Britain shortly, no doubt – are thus going in to Syria in order to take more direct control of a war in which, for much of this year, the momentum has been with the Syrian state forces. Indeed, there has already been talk of a Turkish ground invasion of Syria, along with a new initiative aimed at training yet more insurgents in Saudi Arabia (5000 more, apparently) – the breeding ground of the violent sectarianism that underpins *ISIS*. The idea is that if anyone is to seize ground from *ISIS*, it should not be the secular forces of the Syrian government (the only power capable of actually governing the country, even according to US general Martin Dempsey), but rather the forces of NATO and their *ISIS* lookalike allies.

Why does Cameron claim this war will take years? Because he knows it will escalate. It will escalate because *ISIS* is only the preliminary target, the pretext. The ultimate target is, as it has ever been, the Syrian state itself. It is revealing, in this regard, to look at the pattern of US bombing within Syria that has already been revealed. A Reuters report from last week noted that the strikes “seemed to be intended to hamper Islamic State’s ability to operate across the border with Iraq, where it also controls territory.” In other words, the aim is not to destroy *ISIS* in Syria – but, as far as possible, to *keep* *ISIS* in Syria.

Simon Jenkins, writing in the Guardian, is amongst many others who argue that the airstrikes will not be effective at destroying *ISIS*. They are not, therefore, an act of foreign policy, he says, but merely a piece of macho showmanship. I disagree. Foreign policy is foreign policy, not a game; it only appears to be ill thought-out folly if one misreads its aims – or naively believes

them to be what they are claimed to be. Noam Chomsky argues that states must be held accountable for the predictable consequences of their actions; I would go further. At least in the case of long-established, powerful and prosperous states with hundreds of years of experience in military aggression, we must also assume that such consequences are part of their strategic goals.

So if Britain's actions do not destroy ISIS, but ensue they remain focused on destabilising Iraq and Syria, we must assume this to be part of their aim. If they succeed not in degrading and demoralising, but in boosting the prestige and credibility of ISIS, we must assume this is a goal which Britain seeks. And if ISIS provide the pretext for the West to take more direct control of its war against Syria, paving the way for Turkish occupation, airstrikes against Syrian infrastructure, and the direct coordination of insurgent groups whose ideology and methods are a virtual carbon copy of those of ISIS, again, we should not see this as some kind of opportunist spin-off of the war against ISIS – but as its very purpose.