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A Caliph in a wilderness of mirrors

By Pepe Escobar

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He's invincible. He beheads. He smuggles. He conquers. He's the ultimate jack-of-all-trades. No Tomahawk or Hellfire can touch him. He always gets what he wants; in Kobani; in Anbar province; with the House of Saud (which he wants to replace) trying to make Putin (who he wants to behead) suffer because of [low oil prices](#).

If this was a remake of Orson Welles's noir classic *The Lady from Shanghai*, in the mirror sequence the lawyer (American?) and the femme fatale (Shi'ite?) would also get killed; but The Caliph of Islamic State would survive as a larger than life Welles, free to roam, plunder and "give my love to the sunrise" - as in a Brave Caliphate World shining in "Syraq" over the ashes of the Sykes-Picot agreement.

He's winning big in Iraq's Anbar province. The Caliph's goons are now closing in on - of all places - Abu Ghraib; Dubya, Dick and Rummy's former Torture Central. They are at a mere 12 kilometers away from Baghdad International. A shoulder-launched surface-to-air missile (or MANPAD) away from downing a passenger jet. Certainly not an Emirates flight - after all these are trusted sponsors.

Hit, in Anbar province, is now Caliph territory. The police forces and the province's operational

command have lost almost complete control of Ramadi. The Caliph now controls the crucial axis formed by Hit, Ramadi, Fallujah; Highway 1 between Baghdad and the Jordanian border; and Highway 12 between Baghdad and the Syrian border.

The Caliph's goons are no less than taking over the whole, notorious Baghdad belt, the previous "triangle of death" in those hardcore days of American occupation circa 2004. Message to Donald Rumsfeld: remember your "remnants"? They're back. And they're in charge.

Both Ramadi and Fallujah have been reduced to an accumulation of bombed-out schools, hospitals, homes, mosques and bridges. Residential streets are virtually deserted. According to the United Nations, there are at least 360,803 internally displaced persons in Anbar, as well as 115,000 others in areas under The Caliph's control. At least 63% of the 1.6 million people living in the province are classified as "in need" - with hair-raising minimal access to water, food and health care, and receiving little to absolutely zero humanitarian support from that fiction, the "international community." US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power is not screaming her lungs out for R2P ("responsibility to protect").

How could the Pentagon's spectacular Full Spectrum Dominance possibly not see any of this happening? Of course they see it. But they don't give a damn. The Pentagon occasionally uses AH-64 Apache helicopters to attack some of The Caliph's goons in Ramadi and Hit. But Apaches can be easily hit with MANPADS. They are stationed at Baghdad International and their only mission is to protect the airport. Who cares about local, civilian "collateral damage"?

Married to the Mob

In Kobani, the former third-biggest town in Syrian Kurdistan, in the far northeast, The Caliph also wins big. Another biblical exodus has reached 300,000 refugees - and counting, with over 180,000 headed to Turkey.

The Caliph counts on indirect help from The Sultan (or alternate Caliph), aka Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan. Tehran is - rightfully - furious, as it sees the "West" - and Turkey - betraying the Kurds all over again. It's no secret Sultan Erdogan is doing nothing because he wants to screw the guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD); let them die instead of repelling The Caliph and then be strong enough to threaten Turkish domination of those huge, essentially Kurdish patches of Anatolia. Thus the only thing Sultan Erdogan does support is aimless bombing by the Pentagon cum coalition of the clueless-cowards.

Anybody who believes the US Central Command's spin that House of Saud and United Arab Emirates fighter jets conduct "bombing raids" on the outskirts of Kobani gets a one-way ticket to Oz. Imagine these clowns being able to deploy precision-guided bombs or trained laser spotters. To start with, the Pentagon has zero local intel - as in zero operatives able to paint lasers on targets. Thus the "coalition" can barely hit the odd tank (out of 25 around Kobani) or Humvee out of 2,000 crammed in a valley for almost two weeks now.

But the "coalition" certainly is able - miraculously! - to hit Syrian state infrastructure, as in

energy installations. In June, the official Pentagon excuse was, "We don't have any drone assets in Iraq." Now there's no excuse for drones which can read a "Smoking Kills!" warning in a packet of Marlboros not hitting The Caliph's assets in Kobani - or in Anbar province for that matter. So it's down to a mix of incompetence and neglect. It was so much easier to hit Pashtun wedding parties in the Waziristans. Especially because no one was paying attention.

Erdogan's own goons, meanwhile, have instituted a curfew on all major towns and cities in southeast Anatolia, and are even gunning down peaceful Kurdish protesters. Fifteen million Kurds in Anatolia cannot be wrong; Erdogan wants Kobani to fall. Ankara remains for all practical purposes the top logistical hub for The Caliph's goons. The Sultan is using The Caliph as a proxy army to smash the Kurds.

Terminal evidence has been offered by the leader of the Kurdish PYD, Salih Muslim, meeting Turkish military intel and asking for help. Conditions: abandon any hope of self-determination for Syrian Kurds; give up all your self-governing towns and regions; and watch as we install a Turkish "buffer"/no-fly zone inside Syrian territory.

Don't expect the Obama "Don't Do Stupid Stuff/We Have No Strategy" administration to sentence, "Erdogan must go". Besides, the pathetic club of National Security Advisor Susan Rice and her deputy Ben Rhodes has no clue about what's goin' on.

To the Green Zone!

Tehran, for its part, has clearly identified Erdogan's nasty game. The Sultan knows monster B1-B bombers flying over Kobani are absolutely useless - while The Caliph's goons deploy massive car bombs and keep advancing. "Boots on the ground" will be needed. Enter NATO asset Turkey. But with one condition: regime change in Damascus, or at least a prelude, via that "buffer"/no-fly zone over Syria.

The Big Picture remains the same. Sultan Erdogan and the House of Saud want regime change in Damascus (Erdogan dreams of a Sunni puppet as a vassal of Ankara; the Saudis want their own Wahhabi schemer). Israel merrily agrees. And if that comes with a bonus - attacking the new Iraqi government, still supported by Iran, in the American-made Green Zone - even better. The lowdown: "Don't Do Stupid Stuff" translates as the Gulf Cooperation Council, Turkey and Israel using Washington to advance their quite explicit agenda.

Sultan Erdogan, as a Mob boss, does seem to have learned a thing or two from watching Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*. He's extracting the maximum pound of flesh from the bewildered "Don't do Stupid Stuff" team. The Sultan is boldly aiming at Turkish boots on the ground gloriously invading Syria in NATO "humanitarian intervention" mode. And all this sold as NATO offering "protection" to a member-nation. NATO's new secretary-general, former Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, has just been to Ankara. Saudi Arabia has already "voted" out loud for the "buffer"/no-fly zone. Same for General Francois Hollande, that pitiful excuse for President of France.

Once again, it's Tehran to the rescue. The Foreign Ministry has duly [announced](#) Iran is ready to liberate Kobani from The Caliph's goons (and they can do it) if Bashar Al-Assad says the word.

Now that's how you work the chessboard; NATO is left with zero excuses to mount an invasion of Syria, whatever Mob Boss Erdogan comes up with.

Operation Hands Off My Toyota

The Caliph also wins big in the "bleeding the Pentagon" department. A single US "strike" against his goons - involving F-15s, F-16s or F-22s - costs up to US\$500,000. The Pentagon has just revealed it has spent no less than \$1.1 billion against The Caliph since June.

What for? Virtually all the assets being destroyed by American bombing are made in the USA, deployed to the Iraqi army and then duly captured during The Caliph's offensive. So here we have the Empire of Chaos spending a fortune from the US Treasury to smash tanks, Humvees and other gear already paid for by American taxpayers. No wonder taxpayers are fuming. Thus Operation Hands off My Toyota.

Additionally, the Pentagon does not have a clue on how to build its Obama-designed proxy "rebel" force to fight The Caliph (with no US soldiers or marines; only fanatic Wahhabis and assorted mercenaries).

To start with, they have no clue who the hell qualifies as a "moderate rebel". The rabble must be "vetted" - and then sent to, of all places, Saudi Arabia for training. There the guy in charge will be - who else - a Special Ops honcho, Major General Michael Nagata. Even under the most optimistic scenario, the Pentagon won't have its proxy "moderate rebel" army on the ground in Syria before the summer of 2015.

Hefty bottles of Chateau Margaux can be bet that all this prime US weaponized know how will ultimately end up captured by The Caliph's goons. Same applies to reliable "rebel" intel on the ground.

But the real Dadaist masterpiece is that first these "rebels" will be politely asked by the Pentagon to forget about getting rid of Assad to fight The Caliph. At least for a while. Re-enter Stoltenberg, the new NATO head: "Next year, at the ministerial meeting, we will take decisions regarding the so-called spearhead but, even before it is established, NATO has a strong army after all. We can deploy it wherever we want to." OK, tough guy; why not "Syrac"?

If this all sounds like a plot straight out of hit series *Blacklist*, that's because it is. Why not get Red (James Spader) to fight The Caliph? And then again, what if Red *is* The Caliph? He pretends to fight himself - and he wins, handsomely. Back to Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai*: "Killing you is killing myself". Yet nobody could possibly want The Caliph dead when he's such a smashing, undisputed box-office success.