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## ISIS is US: the Empire and the Evil Genie It Released

By Paul Street

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### Picturing Papal Petrification

The reigning politics and media culture of the United States is not without moments of high comic relief. Three weeks ago, for example, CNN’s Chris Cuomo presented the buffoonish Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump with a bizarre hypothetical situation. What would Trump do, Cuomo asked, if he met the Pope and the pontiff expressed his opinion that capitalism can be “a real avenue to greed, it can be really toxic and corrupt.”

Trump didn't miss a beat. "I'd say ISIS wants to get you," Trump said. "You know that ISIS wants to go in and take over the Vatican? You have heard that. You know, that's a dream of theirs, to go into Italy."

"He talks to you about capitalism, you scare the pope?" Cuomo asked.

"I'm gonna have to scare the Pope because it's the only thing," Trump said. "The Pope, I hope, can only be scared by God. But the truth is — you know, if you look at what's going on — they better hope that capitalism works, because it's the only thing we have right now. And it's a great thing when it works properly."

Funny stuff. It doesn't get much wackier than that. Forget for now the notion that that capitalism is a wonderful "thing" when it is functioning "properly," whatever that means. And never mind whether or not ISIS chiefs dream of claiming St. Peter's Square for Islamic jihad (maybe they do).

### **ISIS as Imperial Blowback**

Let's look instead at Trump's suggestion that the Pope would do well to stop mouthing off about the profits system because he needs to get under the protective umbrella of the U.S. against the Islamic State. Trump's balderdash aside, the notion that the U.S. is the leading and true enemy of ISIS is widely assumed across the U.S., thanks in part to the properly working propagandistic mechanisms of dominant U.S. corporate war, election, and entertainment media.

The notion is false. In reigning US mass media, ISIS is presented as a great cloud of Islamo-extremist evil that mysteriously and shockingly arose out of thin air last year. Nothing could be further from the truth.

That ISIS a grisly and terrible threat cannot be seriously doubted. With its horrifying snuff films, its genocidal practices towards Shiite Muslims, Christians, and "polytheists," and its arch-reactionary social codes imposed through whippings, limb-chopping, beheadings, stoning, eye-gouging, the shooting of children for minor infractions, and its sexual enslavement of women, ISIS is most definitely extremist and perversely evil. The danger has reached critical mass. As Diana Johnstone notes:

"Armed by leftover U.S. military equipment in Iraq, enriched by illicit oil sales, its ranks swollen by young Jihadis from all over the world, the Islamic State threatens the people of Lebanon and Jordan, already struggling to take care of masses of refugees from Palestine, Iraq and now Syria. Fear of the decapitating Islamic fanatics is inciting more and more people to risk everything in order to get to safety in Europe....The Islamic State is truly the horrible enemy caricature of the 'Jewish State,' another political entity based on an exclusive religious identity. Like Israel it has no clearly defined borders, but with a vastly larger potential demographic base."

Whence this stark and borderless evil, driving a massive refugee crisis that has Western media up in moral arms? ISIS is, among other things, a predictable "blowback" consequence of United States wars on Iraq and Syria. Had the United States and its partners in imperial crime not

illegally attacked and invaded Iraq in 2003, more than a million people would be alive today and ISIS and other al Qaeda offshoots would not be terrifying millions into fleeing the Middle East and North Africa. As the British foreign correspondent Patrick Cockburn notes, “the movement’s toxic but potent mix of extreme religious beliefs and military skill is the outcome of the war in Iraq since the U.S. invasion of 2003 and the war in Syria since 2011.” The first war collapsed Iraq state authority and took the lid off the nation’s fierce ethno-religious and sectarian divisions. The U.S. fueled those divisions and Sunni uprisings against the corrupt and sectarian Shia government it set up in Baghdad. It produced droves of martyrs killed by US “Crusaders” in places like Fallujah, a Sunni city the US Marines targeted for near destruction (replete with the bombing of hospitals and the use of radioactive ordnance that created an epidemic of child cancer and leukemia) in 2004 – a town ISIS took over last year. Funny how Western media never seemed terribly upset about the millions of refugees created by U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

But just as the sectarian war that fed ISIS’s horrific emergence was retreating in Iraq, it was reignited when al Qaeda in Iraq, the predecessor to ISIS, found new soil in which to blossom in neighboring Syria. The US, Europe, and their Middle Eastern allies (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates) kept a vicious civil war going against Syria’s Assad regime though it was clear from 2012 on that Assad was not going to fall anytime soon. The US-sponsored war in Syria became the fertile, blood-soaked breeding ground for ISIS’s expansion on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border, something the crooked and incompetent US-backed government in Baghdad was powerless to prevent.

Other recent U.S. policies have fed the extraordinary growth of extreme jihadism modeled on al Qaeda and ISIS. The US-led NATO bombing of Libya in 2011 helped turn that country into a breeding ground for ISIS and related jihadist movements. Thanks in no small part to Obama’s deadly drone, bomb, and other attacks around the Muslim world (the recipient of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize has bombed at least seven Muslim countries so far), the US has helped advance civil war and Sunni, al Qaeda- and ISIS-inspired jihad across the Middle East and North Africa. Washington has generated an expansion of Salafist terror and extremism beyond the wildest dreams of Osama bin-Laden, who was irrelevantly killed by Obama’s beloved Special Forces in May of 2011. As Johnstone notes:

“The results of this madness are washing up on the shores of the Mediterranean. Images and sentiment have replaced thinking about causes and effects. One photo of a drowned toddler causes a media and political uproar. Are people surprised? Didn’t they know that toddlers were being torn to pieces by U.S. bombing of Iraq, by U.S. drones in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen? What about the toddlers obliterated by NATO’s war to ‘free Libya’ from its ‘dictator’? The current refugee crisis in Europe is the inevitable, foreseeable, predicted result of Western policy in the Middle East and North Africa. Gaddafi’s Libya was the wall that kept hundreds of thousands of Africans from migrating illegally to Europe, not only by police methods but even more effectively by offering them development at home and decently paid jobs in Libya. Now Libya is the source both of economic migrants and of refugees from Libya itself, as well as from other lands of desperation. In order to weaken Sudan, the United States (and Susan Rice in particular)-championed creation of the new country of South Sudan, which is not a country at all but the scene of rival massacres driving more and more fugitives toward unwelcoming countries.”

## Cold War and Neoliberal Origins

In reality, the United States' complicity, along with its satellites and allies, in the rise of ISIS, goes back to the late Cold War era. As Cockburn notes in his important book *The Rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (Verso, 2015), the key moment for the rise of political Sunni jihad was 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution turned Iran into a Shia theocracy. In the summer of 1979, the Jimmy Carter White House secretly granted massive military support to fundamentalist tribal groups known as the mujahidin, direct forebears of al-Qaeda and ISIS. During the 1980s, a critical and remarkably durable partnership was formed between the United States, Wahhabist Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan's military and intelligence services. This alliance has been a leading prop of US power in the Middle East. It has also "provided a seed plot for jihadist movements, out of which Osama bin-Laden's al-Qaeda was originally only one strain," Cockburn notes.

Among the many fundamentalist Sunnis recruited to fight in Afghanistan by the CIA and Pakistan's intelligence agency (the ISI) was none other than Osama bin-Laden. A son of the Saudi elite, bin-Laden was the architect of the 9/11/2001 jetliner attacks, a predictable "blowback" from the United States' longstanding mass-murderous actions and presence (Google up "Highway of Death" and "Iraqi children killed by US economic sanctions") in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The al Qaeda attacks on the US "homeland" gave the George W. Bush administration cover and false pretext for the invasion that ironically brought jihadist Sunni rebellion and ultimately ISIS to Iraq (where al Qaeda had no real presence under Saddam). "The shock of 9/11," Cockburn observes "provided a Pearl Harbor moment in the U.S. when public revulsion and fear could be manipulated to implement a preexisting neoconservative agenda by targeting Saddam Hussein and invading Iraq. A reason for waterboarding al Qaeda suspects was to extract confessions implicating Iraq rather than Saudi Arabia in the attacks." Bad information was precisely the point of the torture!

The full history of the United States' role in the creation of ISIS goes back even further. Since the dawn of the Cold War, the United States has lent its considerable power to the defeat of left and secular nationalism across the Middle East. As the Middle East expert Gilbert Achcar noted nine years ago, "when Arab nationalism, Nasserism and similar trends began to crumble [under US pressure] in the 1970s, most governments used Islamic fundamentalism [with US encouragement and assistance] as a tool to counter whatever remnants there were of the left or of secular nationalism." Along with this came the U.S.-led "neoliberal turn of the last quarter century" – the spread of alienating capitalist and commercial forces and values. "Neoliberal globalization," Achcar explained, "has brought about the disintegration of the social fabric and of social safety nets." This led to widespread social disarray and anxiety, fueling "violent assertions of 'identity,' extremism or fanaticism....religious [and/] or political..."

Washington "let [the]...genie out of the bottle....The combination of their own repression of progressive or secular ideologies and the subjective failure – the bankruptcy of these ideologies, aggravated by the collapse of the Soviet Union – left the ground open to the only ideological channel of anti-Western protest available, which was Islamic fundamentalism" – itself long "tolerated and even used and encouraged by the local regimes and by the United States," Achcar wrote.

None of all this essential historical background makes it into “mainstream” US media and politics culture. That makes it impossible for the typical American who relies on that culture for information on world events to respond to the rise of ISIS with anything but clueless surprise and astonished horror of the kind that supports yet more of the same imperial policy that has done so much to create the horrific nightmare.

### **Choosing ISIS and the Saudi Kingdom Over Assad and Iran – in the Name of Democracy**

Thirty-six years after Jimmy Carter decided to arm jihad in Afghanistan, the fanatical ISIS stands as the ultimate armed and dangerous Islamist genie out of the bottle. Who can halt the expansion of its maniacal rule over all of Mesopotamia and beyond? Only the Syrian State headed by Bashar al Assad, with assistance from Russia and the Islamic State’s blood enemy Iran. “The choice,” Johnstone rightly reminds us, “is not between Assad and ‘Western democracy.’ The choice is between Assad and the Islamic State.” But the West, with Washington calling the tune, still vows that “Assad must go.” It prefers the spread and contagion of Islamist chaos over the rational resolution of the crisis – and not just in the Middle East but across Africa. Washington absurdly warns Russia against “escalating the conflict in Syria” by providing Assad military assistance to help Syria fight jihadists. Meanwhile it maintains close relations and undertakes joint military and intelligence operations with its client states Saudi Arabia (the most reactionary government on Earth), Pakistan, and Turkey, all key sponsors of Salafist jihad.

The U.S. prefers to keep the dark genie out and about like never before. The Empire’s jihad-fueling policy is based on what Johnstone called “the tacit assumption that civil war would be better for the people of those countries than living under a ‘dictatorship.’ In practice, however,” Johnston adds, “most people can get along better without a vote than without a roof over their heads. Or without their heads.”

### **Justification and Pretext for What Uncle Sam Does Best**

It is naïve to think that all of this madness was unanticipated by the architects and planners of U.S. global policy. Destabilization is Washington’s tool and game in a time when America’s long-lost economic-capitalist hegemony is fading at an ever accelerating pace (China has emerged as the leading foreign economic-developmental force in Africa by far) and U.S. global power relies on military muscle above all. As Eric Draitser notes, destabilization “provides the justification and pretext for expanded US military engagement, precisely what [Washington policy planners] wanted all along.” Military engagement and “blowing shit up” (including whole nations, regions, societies, and civilizations) are what Uncle Sam does best. It also and not just coincidentally consistent with the nuclear-armed US client and ally Israel’s murderous and timeworn Middle Eastern strategy of divide and rule.

And, as the Pope might well tell The Donald, causing Trump to acknowledge the pontiff’s wisdom perhaps, more military engagement means more profits for high-tech “defense” (empire) contractors like Boeing, Raytheon, and Lockheed Martin. “The costs of empire,” Noam Chomsky reminded us in 1969, “are in general distributed over the society as a whole, while its profits revert to a few within.” American state military-Keynesian capitalism, such as it is, goes hand in hand with ISIS – and the al Nusra Front, Boko Haram, al-Shabab, Al Qaeda in the Arab

Peninsula, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar al-Sharia, Jemaah Islamiah, Abu Sayyaf, Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis, and all the rest. ISIS et. al. help that capitalism work quite well for America's corporate masters of war.

ISIS is US, something Trump seems to have at least partly grasped in his own preposterous, pope-pricking way: "problems with capitalism? Scare the world with grave threats that require U.S. military power [never mind that U.S. Empire created the threats in the first place]. That's how to make America great again!"

Rosa Luxembourg got it right: it was socialism or barbarism. Adding in the problem of climate change, the Pope appears to agree with Istvan Meszaros' ecological update of Rosa for the warming 21<sup>st</sup> century: "or barbarism if we're lucky." But that's another essay.