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## Part 1 – Our Terrorists

“This is an organisation that has an apocalyptic, end-of-days strategic vision which will eventually have to be defeated,” *Gen Martin Dempsey, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a Pentagon press conference in August.*

September 12, 2014 "[ICH](#)" - Military action is necessary to halt the spread of the ISIS/IS “cancer,” said President Obama. Yesterday, in his much anticipated address, he called for expanded airstrikes across Iraq and Syria, and new measures to arm and train Iraqi and Kurdish ground forces.

“The only way to defeat [IS] is to stand firm and to send a very straightforward message,” *declared Prime Minister Cameron.* “A country like ours will not be cowed by these barbaric killers.”

Missing from the chorus of outrage, however, has been any acknowledgement of the integral role of covert US and British regional military intelligence strategy in empowering and even directly sponsoring the very same virulent Islamist militants in Iraq, Syria and beyond, that went on to break away from al-Qaeda and form ‘ISIS’, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or now simply, the Islamic State (IS).

Since 2003, Anglo-American power has secretly and openly coordinated direct and indirect support for Islamist terrorist groups linked to al-Qaeda across the Middle East and North Africa. This ill-conceived patchwork geostrategy is a legacy of the persistent influence of neoconservative ideology, motivated by longstanding but often contradictory ambitions to dominate regional oil resources, defend an expansionist Israel, and in pursuit of these, re-draw the map of the Middle East.

Now despite Pentagon denials that there will be boots on the ground – and Obama's insistence that this would not be another "Iraq war" – local Kurdish military and intelligence sources confirm that US and German [special operations forces](#) are already "on the ground here. They are helping to support us in the attack." US airstrikes on ISIS positions and arms supplies to the Kurds have also been accompanied by British RAF reconnaissance flights over the region and [UK weapons shipments](#) to Kurdish peshmerga forces.

### Divide and rule in Iraq

"It's not that we don't want the Salafis to throw bombs," said one [US government defense consultant](#) in 2007.

"It's who they throw them at – Hezbollah, Moqtada al-Sadr, Iran, and at the Syrians, if they continue to work with Hezbollah and Iran."

Early during the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, the US covertly supplied arms to al-Qaeda affiliated insurgents even while ostensibly supporting an emerging Shi'a-dominated administration.

Pakistani defense sources interviewed by [Asia Times](#) in February 2005 confirmed that insurgents described as "former Ba'ath party" loyalists – who were being [recruited and trained](#)

by "al-Qaeda in Iraq" under the leadership of the late Abu Musab Zarqawi – were being supplied Pakistan-manufactured weapons by the US. The arms shipments included rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, ammunition, rockets and other light weaponry. These arms "could not be destined for the Iraqi security forces because US arms would be given to them", a source told Syed Saleem Shahzad – the Times' Pakistan bureau chief who, "known for his [exposes of the Pakistani military](#)

" according to the New Yorker, was murdered in 2011. Rather, the US is playing a double-game to "head off" the threat of a "Shi'ite clergy-driven religious movement," said the Pakistani defense source.

This was not the only way US strategy aided the rise of Zarqawi, a bin Laden mentee and brainchild of the extremist ideology that would later spawn 'ISIS.'



[US Special Forces](#) Bankrolling al-Qaeda in Syria

According to former French foreign minister [Roland Dumas](#), Britain had planned covert action in Syria as early as 2009: “I was in England two years before the violence in Syria on other business,” he told French television: “I met with top British officials, who confessed to me that they were preparing something in Syria. This was in Britain not in America. Britain was preparing gunmen to invade Syria.”

Leaked emails from the [private intelligence firm Stratfor](#), including notes from [a meeting with Pentagon officials](#), confirmed that as of 2011, US and UK special forces training of Syrian opposition forces was well underway. The goal was to elicit the “collapse” of Assad’s regime “from within.”

Since then, the role of the [Gulf states](#) – namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan (as well as NATO member Turkey) – in officially and

unofficially [financing](#) and coordinating the [most virulent elements](#) amongst Syria's rebels under the tutelage of US military intelligence is no secret. Yet the conventional wisdom is that the funneling of support to Islamist extremists in the rebel movement affiliated to al-Qaeda has been a colossal and regrettable error.

The reality is very different. The empowerment of the Islamist factions within the 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA) was a foregone conclusion of the strategy.



*United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (R) greets Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu (L), United Arab Emirates' Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan (2nd L) and British Foreign Minister William Hague, in Tunis*

In its drive to depose Col. Qaddafi in Libya, NATO had previously allied itself with rebels affiliated to the al-Qaeda faction, the Islamic Fighting Group. The resulting Libyan regime backed by the US was in turn [liaising with FSA leaders](#) in Istanbul to provide money and heavy weapons for the anti-Assad insurgency. The State Department even hired an al-Qaeda affiliated Libyan militia group to provide [security](#) for the US embassy in Benghazi – although they had links with the very people that attacked the embassy.

Last year, CNN confirmed that CIA officials operating secretly out of the Benghazi embassy were being forced to take extra [polygraph tests](#) to keep under wraps what US Congressman suspect was a covert operation “to move surface-to-air missiles out of Libya, through Turkey, and into the hands of Syrian rebels.”

With their [command and control centre](#) based in Istanbul, Turkey, military supplies from Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular were transported by Turkish intelligence to the border for rebel acquisition. [CIA](#)

[operatives along with Israeli and Jordanian commandos](#) were also training FSA rebels on the Jordanian-Syrian border with anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons. In addition, other [reports](#)

show that British and French military were also involved in these secret training programmes. It appears that the same FSA rebels receiving this elite training went straight into ISIS – last month one ISIS commander,

[Abu Yusaf](#), said, “Many of the FSA people who the west has trained are actually joining us.”

[The National](#) thus confirmed the existence of another command and control centre in Amman, Jordan, “staffed by western and Arab military officials,” which “channels vehicles, sniper rifles, mortars, heavy machine guns, small arms and ammunition to Free Syrian Army units.” Rebel and opposition sources described the weapons bridge as “a well-run operation staffed by high-ranking military officials from 14 countries, including the US, European nations and Arabian Gulf states, the latter providing the bulk of materiel and financial support to rebel factions.”

The FSA sources interviewed by The National went to pains to deny that any al-Qaeda affiliated factions were involved in the control centre, or would receive any weapons support. But this is difficult to believe given that “Saudi and Qatari-supplied weapons” were being funneled through to the rebels via Amman, to their favoured factions.

Classified [assessments](#) of the military assistance supplied by US allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar obtained by the New York Times showed that “most of the arms shipped at the behest of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to supply Syrian rebel groups... are going to hardline Islamic jihadists, and not the more secular opposition groups that the West wants to bolster.”



Lest there be any doubt as to the extent to which all this covert military assistance coordinated by the US has gone to support al-Qaeda affiliated factions in the FSA, it is worth noting that earlier this year, the Israeli military intelligence website [Debkafile](#) – run by two veteran correspondents who covered the Middle East for 23 years for The Economist – reported that: “Turkey is giving Syrian rebel forces, including the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, passage through its territory to attack the northwestern Syrian coastal area around Latakia.”

In August, [Debkafile](#) reported that “The US, Jordan and Israel are quietly backing the mixed bag of some 30 Syrian rebel factions”, some of which had just “seized control of the Syrian side of the Quneitra crossing, the only transit point between Israeli and Syrian Golan.” However, [Debkafile](#) noted, “al-Qaeda elements have permeated all those factions.” Israel has provided limited support to these rebels in the form of “medical care,” as well as “arms, intelligence and food...”

“Israel acted as a member, along with the US and Jordan, of a support system for rebel groups fighting in southern Syria. Their efforts are coordinated through a war-room which the Pentagon established last year near Amman. The US, Jordanian and Israeli officers manning the facility determine in consultation which rebel factions are provided with reinforcements from the special training camps run for Syrian rebels in Jordan, and which will receive arms. All three governments understand perfectly that, notwithstanding all their precautions, some of their military assistance is bound to percolate to al-Qaeda’s Syrian arm, Jabhat Al-Nusra, which is fighting in rebel ranks. Neither Washington or Jerusalem or Amman would be comfortable in admitting they are arming al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front in southern Syria.”

This support also went to ISIS. Although the latter was originally founded in Iraq in October 2006, by 2013 the group had significantly expanded its operations in Syria working alongside al-Qaeda’s al-Nusra until February 2014, when ISIS was formally denounced by al-Qaeda. Even so, experts on the region’s Islamist groups point out that the [alleged rift](#) between al-Nusra and ISIS, while real, is not as fraught as one might hope, constituting a mere difference in tactics rather than fundamental ideology.



## Part 2 – THE LONG WAR

### Follow the money

Media reports following ISIS' conquest of much of northern and central Iraq this summer have painted the group as the world's most super-efficient, self-financed, terrorist organisation that has been able to consolidate itself exclusively through extensive looting of Iraq's banks and funds from black market oil sales. Much of this narrative, however, has derived from dubious sources, and overlooked disturbing details.

One senior anonymous intelligence source told Guardian correspondent [Martin Chulov](#)

, for instance, that over 160 computer flash sticks obtained from an ISIS hideout revealed information on ISIS' finances that was completely new to the intelligence community.

"Before Mosul, their total cash and assets were \$875m [£515m]," said the official on the funds obtained largely via "massive cashflows from the oilfields of eastern Syria, which it had commandeered in late 2012." Afterwards, "with the money they robbed from banks and the value of the military supplies they looted, they could add another \$1.5bn to that." The thrust of the narrative coming from intelligence sources was simple: "They had done this all themselves. There was no state actor at all behind them, which we had long known. They don't need one."

"ISIS' half-a-billion-dollar bank heist makes it world's richest terror group," *clai*

med the Telegraph, adding that the figure did not include additional stolen gold bullion, and millions more grabbed from banks “across the region.”

This story of ISIS’ stupendous bank looting spree across Iraq made global headlines but turned out to be [disinformation](#). Senior Iraqi officials and bankers confirmed that banks in Iraq, including Mosul where ISIS supposedly stole \$430 million, had faced no assault, remain open, and are guarded by their own private security forces.

How did the story come about? One of its prime sources was Iraqi parliamentarian [Ahmed Chalabi](#) – the same man who under the wing of his ‘Iraqi National Congress’ peddled false intelligence about Saddam’s [weapons of mass destruction](#) and ties to al-Qaeda.

In June, Chalabi met with the US ambassador to Iraq, Robert Beecroft, and Brett McGurk, the State Department’s deputy assistant secretary of state for Iraq and Iran. According to sources cited by [Buzzfeed](#) in June, Beecroft “has been meeting Chalabi for months and has dined at his mansion in Baghdad.”

### Follow the oil

But while ISIS has clearly obtained funding from donors in the Gulf states, many of its fighters having broken away from the more traditional al-Qaeda affiliated groups like Jabhut al-Nusra, it has also successfully leveraged its control over Syrian and Iraqi oil fields.

In January, the [New York Times](#) reported that “Islamist rebels and extremist groups have seized control of most of Syria’s oil and gas resources”, bolstering “the fortunes of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, and the Nusra Front, both of which are offshoots of al-Qaeda.” Al-Qaeda affiliated rebels had “seized control of the oil and gas fields scattered across the country’s north and east,” while more moderate “Western-backed rebel groups do not appear to be involved in the oil trade, in large part because they have not taken over any oil fields.”

Yet the west had directly aided these Islamist groups in their efforts to operationalise



Syria's oil fields. In April 2013, for instance, the Times noted that al-Qaeda rebels had taken over key regions of Syria: "Nusra's hand is felt most strongly in Aleppo", where the al-Qaeda affiliate had established in coordination with other rebel groups

[including ISIS](#)

"a Shariah Commission" running "a police force and an Islamic court that hands down sentences that have included lashings." Al-Qaeda fighters also "control the power plant and distribute flour to keep the city's bakeries running." Additionally, they "have seized government oil fields" in provinces of Deir al-Zour and Hasaka, and now make a "profit from the crude they produce."

Lost in the fog of media hype was the disconcerting fact that these al-Qaeda rebel bread and oil operations in Aleppo, Deir al-Zour and Hasaka were directly and indirectly supported by the US and the European Union (EU). One account by the

[Washington Post](#)

for instance refers to a stealth mission in Aleppo "to deliver food and other aid to needy Syrians – all of it paid for by the US government," including the supply of flour. "The bakery is fully supplied with flour paid for by the United States," the Post continues, noting that local consumers, however, "credited Jabhat al-Nusra – a rebel group the United States has designated a terrorist organisation because of its ties to al-Qaeda – with providing flour to the region, though he admitted he wasn't sure where it comes from."

And in the same month that al-Qaeda's control of Syria's main oil regions in Deir al-Zour and Hasaka was confirmed, the [EU voted to ease an oil embargo](#) on Syria to allow oil to be sold on international markets from these very al-Qaeda controlled oil fields. European companies would be permitted to buy crude oil and petroleum products from these areas, although transactions would be approved by the Syrian National Coalition. Due to damaged infrastructure, oil would be trucked by road to Turkey where the nearest refineries are located.

"The logical conclusion from this craziness is that Europe will be funding al-Qaeda," said [Joshua Landis](#), a Syria expert at the University of Oklahoma.

Just two months later, a former senior staffer at the Syria Support Group in DC, David Falt, leaked internal SSG [emails](#) confirming that the group was "obsessed" with brokering "jackpot" oil deals on behalf of the FSA for Syria's rebel-run oil regions.

"The idea they could raise hundreds of millions from the sale of the oil came to dominate the work of the SSG to the point no real attention was paid to the nature of the conflict," said Falt, referring in particular to SSG's director Brian Neill Sayers,

who before his SSG role worked with NATO's Operations Division. Their aim was to raise money for the rebels by selling the rights to Syrian oil. **Tacit complicity in IS oil smuggling**

Even as al-Qaeda fighters increasingly decide to join up with IS, the ad hoc black market oil production and export infrastructure established by the Islamist groups in Syria has continued to function with, it seems, the tacit support of regional and western powers.

According to Ali [Ediboglu](#), a Turkish MP for the border province of Hatay, IS is selling the bulk of its oil from regions in Syria and Mosul in Iraq through Turkey, with the tacit consent of Turkish authorities: "They have laid pipes from villages near the Turkish border at Hatay. Similar pipes exist also at [the Turkish border regions of] Kilis, Urfa and Gaziantep. They transfer the oil to Turkey and parlay it into cash. They take the oil from the refineries at zero cost. Using primitive means, they refine the oil in areas close to the Turkish border and then sell it via Turkey. This is worth \$800 million." He also noted that the extent of this and related operations indicates official Turkish complicity. "Fighters from Europe, Russia, Asian countries and Chechnya are going in large numbers both to Syria and Iraq, crossing from Turkish territory. There is information that at least 1,000 Turkish nationals are helping those foreign fighters sneak into Syria and Iraq to join ISIS. The National Intelligence Organization (MIT) is allegedly involved. None of this can be happening without MIT's knowledge."

Similarly, there is evidence that authorities in the Kurdish region of Iraq are also turning a blind eye to IS oil smuggling. In July, [Iraqi officials](#) said that IS had begun selling oil extracted from in the northern province of Salahuddin. One official pointed out that "the Kurdish peshmerga forces stopped the sale of oil at first, but later allowed tankers to transfer and sell oil."

State of Law coalition MP Alia Nasseef also accused the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of secretly trading oil with IS: "What is happening shows the extent of the massive conspiracy against Iraq by Kurdish politicians... The [illegal] sale of Iraqi oil to ISIS or anyone else is something that would not surprise us." Although Kurdish officials have roundly rejected these accusations, [informed sources](#) told the Arabic daily Asharq Al-Awsat that Iraqi crude captured by ISIS was "being sold to Kurdish traders in the border regions straddling Iraq, Iran and Syria, and was being shipped to Pakistan where it was being sold 'for less than half its original price.'"

An [official statement](#) in August from Iraq's Oil Ministry warned that any oil not sanctioned by Baghdad could include crude smuggled illegally from IS:

"International purchasers [of crude oil] and other market participants should be aware that any oil exports made without the authorisation of the Ministry of Oil may contain crude oil originating from fields under the control of [ISIS]."

"Countries like Turkey have turned a blind eye to the practice" of IS oil smuggling, said [Luay al-Khateeb](#), a fellow at the Brookings Doha Center, "and international pressure should be mounted to close down black markets in its southern region." So far there has been no such pressure. Meanwhile, IS oil smuggling continues, with observers [inside and outside Turkey](#) noting that the Turkish government is tacitly allowing IS to flourish as it prefers the rebels to the Assad regime.

According to former Iraqi oil minister Isam al-Jalabi, "Turkey is the biggest winner from the Islamic State's oil smuggling trade." Both traders and oil firms are involved, he said, with the low prices allowing for "massive" profits for the countries facilitating the smuggling.

### Buying ISIS oil?

Early last month, a tanker carrying over a million barrels in crude oil from northern Iraq's Kurdish region arrived at the Texas Gulf of Mexico. The oil had been refined in the Iraqi Kurdish region before being pumped through a new pipeline from the KRG area ending up at Ceyhan, Turkey, where it was then loaded onto the tanker for shipping to the US. Baghdad's efforts to stop the oil sale on the basis of its having national jurisdiction were rebuffed by [American courts](#).

In early September, the European Union's ambassador to Iraq, Jana Hybášková, told the [EU Foreign Affairs Committee](#) that "several EU member states have bought oil from the Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS) terrorist organisation that has been brutally conquering large portions of Iraq and Syria," according to Israel National News. She however "refused to divulge the names of the countries despite being asked numerous times."

A third end-point for the KRG's crude this summer, once again shipped via Turkey's port of Ceyhan, was Israel's southwestern port of [Ashkelon](#). This is hardly news

though. In May,

[Reuters](#)

revealed that Israeli and US oil refineries had been regularly purchasing and importing KRG's disputed oil.

Meanwhile, as this triangle of covert oil shipments in which ISIS crude appears to be hopelessly entangled becomes more established, Turkey has increasingly demanded that the US pursue formal measures to [lift obstacles](#) to Kurdish oil sales to global markets. The KRG plans to export as much as 1 million barrels of oil a day by next year through its [pipeline](#) to Turkey.

**[Read the remainder of this article here.](#)**