

# The Origins of Islamic State

*The following interview with EIR's Jeffrey Steinberg by Haneul Na'avi of the website The Last Defense was conducted on Oct. 22, 2014, and posted Jan. 27, 2015, under the title "Riding the Caliphate Interstate." It was also posted Jan. 30 in the English-language version of pravda.ru.*

In order to fully communicate the history of the Islamic State and its relationship with the House of Saud and Turkey, we consulted Jeffrey Steinberg, Senior Editor and Counterintelligence Director of the Executive Intelligence Review, with 40 years of experience, and work with the LaRouchePAC [www.larouchepac.com]. He is also member of and active contributor to the Schiller Institute based in Wiesbaden, Germany. Click [here](#) to listen to the full interview.

**Haneul Na'avi:** Can you give us a history of the Islamic State? How did they rise to power after the vacuum of power in Iraq, following the U.S.-NATO invasion?

**Steinberg:** You have to go back to 1979 when Zbigniew Brzezinski was the National Security Advisor to Jimmy Carter, when he convinced the President to sign a secret authorization to begin covert operations in Afghanistan, six months before the Soviets arrived, around Christmastime of 1979. Known as the Bernard Lewis Plan, it involved promoting Islamic fundamentalism all across the southern tier of the Soviet Union. When the Soviets finally moved in, things became concentrated in building up a radical Islamic terrorist apparatus, sponsored by the U.S., British, Saudis, French, and Israelis.

The idea was to play Islamic fundamentalism off against, at that time, the "godless" Soviet Union. The problem was, that as a result of this effort, you had the emergence of groups such as al-Qaeda. Osama bin Laden himself first went to Peshawar in northwest Pakistan, near the Afghanistan border, as part of the Anglo-American/Saudi project to create a terrorist

infrastructure against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. That effort succeeded somewhat, but the consequence of that was the birth of an international Jihadi terrorist apparatus that is haunting the world today.

So, you had the original establishment of al-Qaeda. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, some of those networks that were operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan had spread to other areas, including Somalia. Chechen rebels who had been fighting in the [Russian] Caucasus, then moved to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and became some of the commanders of what was initially al-Qaeda. And that organization morphed into a lot of spin-offs, including al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and there've been various splits and permutations out of that. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group was originally part of al-Qaeda, and they went back to Libya. And the U.S. and the British and the French backed those Islamist networks to overthrow Qaddafi; and we now have a spreading terrorist mess in North Africa and the Maghreb region as a result.

So, to really understand it, you need minimally to go back to the real origin of the current form of this operation, which is the late 1970s' through the 1980s' Afghanistan mujihadeen.

I was frequently on Capitol Hill in the mid-1980s, and you would frequently see well-known neoconservatives—people like Michael Ledeen, Richard Perle—touring around Capitol Hill with these so-called Afghan "freedom fighters," who later turned out to be leading figures in al-Qaeda. There is a long history of collusion between Western intelligence agencies and these radical Sunni jihadist networks.

## The Saudi Connection

**Na'avi:** The Islamic State wants to expand its territory. How much of their aim is actually a legitimate caliphate they want to establish? What are their personal



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*EIR's Jeffrey Steinberg: With the right coalition of forces, IS "could be crushed in a very short period of time."*

aims and what exactly are they trying to accomplish? Are they just controlled by the West, or is this something more sinister?

**Steinberg:** I think that what you have to have, again, is a little bit more of the history.

Saudi Arabia is a kingdom that is really a dual power situation, between the House of Saud and the Wahhabi clergy, who are among the most radical fundamentalists of all the Sunni Islamic branches. In the 1960s, as the result of the crackdown by Egyptian President Nasser against the Muslim Brotherhood, many of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers fled to Saudi Arabia, and kind of morphed together with the Wahhabis. and began spreading a form of pan-Arabism around the world. With enormous financing from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, these networks began spreading.

They got enormous funding for opening up madrasas—special Islamist schools—in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and parts of Africa. And as early as 1963, in Saudi Arabia, you had the founding of the Muslim World League, which was the initial form of what is today referred to as neo-Salafism, a form of fundamentalist Sunni Islam, which also has a kind of messianic global caliphate ideology behind it.

These networks not only were financed by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, other countries in the Gulf, but enjoyed an enormous amount of support from British intelligence, and secondarily, from the U.S.

The idea continued, all along, to be the notion of playing the Islamic fundamentalist card against the Soviets, and, to a secondary degree against China. So, there are people like [Abu Bakr] al-Baghdadi, I'm sure, who's the nominal head of the Islamic State group, who are committed to the idea of establishing a kind of a universal caliphate under their direction. It's for that reason, that there's the beginning of a certain concern between the Saudis and the IS network, that ultimately they could look to overrun Saudi Arabia, and incorporate it into their brand of a new, universal caliphate.

So, these things get very tricky and complicated.

You had a merger in Saudi Arabia of the Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabism, but later, when the Muslim Brotherhood began getting involved in "democratic electoral politics" in places like Egypt, the Saudis no longer liked that. And so, you have splits within what had previously been a kind of unified structure supporting the spread of this jihadism.

So, I think what you've got right now is a combination of various elements. IS inside Iraq contains a network of international jihadists, who've been involved in this fight, in many cases more than a decade—Chechens, Uighurs, Afghans, Saudis, Libyans, and Iraqis—who've been traveling around the world involved in this continuous jihadi battle, honing skills in asymmetric warfare.

Then, you also have in Iraq, remnants of the old Saddam Hussein military apparatus, who are deeply resentful that they were removed from any power-sharing in their country, and who have opportunistically joined the neo-Salafists.

### Turkey's Neo-Ottoman Policy

**Na'avi:** I want to ask about Turkey. President Tayyip Erdogan seems to want to expand into the European Union; he's in NATO, and yet he wants to be involved in the Arab world, and have more regional influence in the MENA [Middle East/North Africa] region. What exactly are the aims and aspirations of Erdogan related to these three fronts?

**Steinberg:** If you just look back really over the last two years, almost since the beginning of the Syria crisis, the Turks have been instrumental in the rise of ISIS. There were several critical border crossings that were more or less turned over to ISIS. They had training facilities inside Turkish territory. They very much integrated with smuggling networks that operate from

inside Turkey into northern Syria and Iraq, and those networks are very much integrated into the ruling AKP [Justice and Development Party] and are closely coordinated with the Turkish MIT, the equivalent to the CIA, headed by [Hakan] Fidan, one of the most trusted right-hand men of Erdogan.

So, if you look at the AKP, it's an informal kind of Muslim Brotherhood with many parallels. There are more radical elements than Erdogan himself, within the party structure, and you had former President [Abdullah] Gül, who was much more of a genuine moderate than Erdogan and [Ahmet] Davutoglu, now the prime minister. They're playing a dangerous game; they've already crossed swords with the U.S.; and Washington, at least at the Pentagon, is very much pissed off at Erdogan.

There was a meeting about a week ago in Washington at the Pentagon of all of the military commanders of the anti-ISIS "coalition of the willing." Not only did Turkey send only a deputy operations director, not the head of the Armed Forces, to the meeting, but the day before the meeting, they carried out a bombing campaign against the PKK [Kurdistan Workers Party] inside Turkey, but right along the borders of Syria and Iraq. I know that they were furious about that at the Pentagon.

Washington, and some European collaborators, worked behind the scenes very intensively, but quietly, to make sure that Turkey didn't get the seat on the UN Security Council that they were heavily lobbying for. Frictions are becoming severe, and there are some American and European military personnel who are asking: Why is Turkey in NATO if they're on the other side? I think that the neo-Ottoman geopolitical aspirations of Turkey in the Middle East/North Africa region trump its desire to integrate into the European Union.

And frankly, I think, with the state of the European economies, I don't see why anyone in his right mind would want to become part of that. But Turkey is definitely pursuing a kind of neo-Ottoman policy towards the region, and that's been openly promoted by Davutoglu, on many occasions.

## **IS: Out of Control**

**Na'avi:** Who has more control in the region? And is the Islamic State some kind of geopolitical game? Or is it completely out of control, with basically everyone at the mercy of what they want to establish?

**Steinberg:** They're not completely out of control. The idea that the Saudis are open to training elements in Saudi territory to be ostensibly used in the fight against both the Islamic State and [Syrian President Bashar] Assad, is, to me, ludicrous. The Saudis have been strong backers of IS; and I am not convinced that they consider this to be an existential threat to the survival of the House of Saud.

There was a period in the 1990s, when bin Laden was protesting against the residual U.S. military forces in Saudi Arabia after the first Iraq War. Then-head of Saudi Intelligence Turki bin Faisal sent an emissary to Afghanistan to meet with bin Laden. And basically a handshake agreement was reached, and the Saudi funds once again flowed freely to al-Qaeda, with the understanding that al-Qaeda would target the U.S., but not the House of Saud. So, they're perfectly capable of negotiating an understanding with IS.

Now, things can change. There are Frankenstein's monsters that get out of control. But I'm not persuaded that we're at that point yet.

You have a lot of contending forces, even among the Gulf States—Turkey and Qatar are working with the Muslim Brotherhood. The fact that Turkey is also supposedly going to begin training forces against Assad, on Turkish territory, tells me that what they're attempting to do is to put forces on the ground in Syria who will be very much tied to Turkey, and undoubtedly will be led by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The elected government in Libya has allied with Egypt against the Libyan Dawn Movement, which is backed by Turkey and Qatar, again, because of the Muslim Brotherhood connection.

So, within the Sunni world, you have these fault lines that are becoming militarized, at the same time that you have the militarization of the conflict between the Sunnis and Shi'ites. So, it makes for a very, very messy situation which could very easily get out of hand, and turn into a regional war or even something bigger.

## **The Alliance That Can Defeat IS**

**Na'avi:** You touch on a very important question: the way that the planned expansion of the caliphate will affect at least three BRICS nations, and the West as well, creating a World War III potential. How will this affect Russia, China, India, as well as a few of the Western players in this conflict?

**Steinberg:** Several prominent Russians have made statements, one from [ex-Ambassador to Libya, Yemen,

and Tunisia] [Veniamin] Popov, who said, if the U.S. is serious about waging war with IS, then it has to be a coalition of countries with shared interests. This emphatically includes the BRICS; particularly Russia and China, for reasons such as the targeting of the Caucasus, and Xinjiang provinces of Western China, where the Uighurs are a part of this “Jihadists without Borders” apparatus. There are at least 1,000 Chechens who are fighting with ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and who represent some of the most seasoned IS commanders. They’ve been in combat continuously for over a decade since the Chechen wars.

Popov continued: A serious alliance would involve the U.S., Russia, China, other BRICS countries, as well as Iran, and Syria.

You can’t trust Saudi Arabia or other GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries to genuinely try to defeat IS. If you had an alliance among those countries, you would have the resources to absolutely crush IS in Iraq and Syria. The Russians have a close relationship with the Syrians and Iranians, and a coalition under those circumstances could have genuine, direct coordi-

nation, rather than the sneaky ones we have now. Egypt is a channel for feeding intelligence to the Syrian military in their fight against the rebels. The Iranians are getting certain benefit from coordinated efforts between Iraq and the U.S., and Shi’ite militias, who are some of the most effective fighters against the Islamic State there.

But if you had a genuine, out-front collaboration among all of these countries, it would be a whole different situation, and there’s no doubt in my mind that the Islamic State could be crushed in a very short period of time.

Ultimately, IS has approximately 35-50,000 fighters in the region, and they’re relying on former Ba’athist military personnel in Iraq, and on some of the Sunni tribes in Anbar province who will go where they think the winner is. They’re not ideologically committed to the Islamic State; they don’t believe in a caliphate. They’re just pissed off because they’ve been cut out from the power-sharing in their own country, and are demonstrating that they have more military ability aligned with IS than the Iraqi government has. The minute those tribes see a fairer power-share, and are convinced Islamists will suffer defeat, they’ll switch sides. You’ll have a replay of the Anbar Awakening from the mid 2000s.

So there’s a limit to how far IS can go before overstretching themselves.

They certainly don’t pose a challenge to overthrow President Putin in Russia, or Xi Jinping in China, but they can make a mess of things. They can provoke a lot of terrorism. They can provoke an over-reaction that would be responded to harshly, by the usual “humanitarian interventionists” and neo-conservative crowd in the West. But I think we’re dealing with something that has a genuine limit on its capabilities, and, if it’s done right, it can be defeated.

The problem you’re dealing with is that the British, certain factions in the U.S., and the Saudis, still continue to see this as an Islamic card they can play against the Russians and Chinese. And to the extent they are freaked out by what the BRICS process represents since the July [2014] meeting in Brazil—that’s where you can see these asymmetric operations, combined with things like Air-Sea Battle against China, and supporting neo-Nazis in Ukraine targeting Russia, leading to a situation where you do have a general war that becomes a World War.



## The Al-Qaeda Executive

Financed and deployed by the British-Saudi Empire, al-Qaeda has been protected by the Obama Administration to accomplish the Empire's global war. In this feature [video](#), LaRouchePAC documents President Obama's use of the al-Qaeda networks to overthrow Qaddafi in Libya, and to carry out bloody regime-change against Assad in Syria, by the same forces who attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi.

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