



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on September 10, 2014

ISIS May Not be as Powerful as Feared, Says Canadian Journalist

ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and currently operating under its new brand, “The Islamic State,” is the new al-Qaeda. But one Canadian journalist believes that ISIS is not nearly so powerful as most Westerners think, and that because the group has far more enemies than allies, it is unlikely to accomplish its objectives to gain control of a wide swath of the Middle East.



While ISIS may be the new al-Qaeda in the sense that it has become the most feared terrorist organization in the Middle East at the moment, it is, in fact, an offshoot of the *old* al-Qaeda. It is the successor to the group commonly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). ISIS had close links to al-Qaeda until February 2014, when the original al-Qaeda disowned the group, reportedly for its brutality and “notorious intractability.”

On May 14, the U.S. State Department announced its decision to use “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL) as the group’s primary name. By whatever name, however, ISIS has dominated the news for its swift capture of much territory in northern Iraq and for its brutal treatment of those under its control. This has included the beheadings of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff in August. The previous month, the terrorist group beheaded approximately 50 soldiers of Syria’s 17th division after attacking their base in Ar-Raqqah, Syria.

Despite its brutality and rapid takeover of important cities in Iraq, such as Mosul and Tikrit, Andre Mayer, writing an analysis for Canada’s CBC on September 8, said that ISIS may not be as powerful as many Westerners believe.

Mayer cites Wayne White, a scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C., who worked for several decades as an Iraq analyst for the U.S. government. White maintains that the language used by Western governments and media to characterize ISIS has “distorted” the extent of the group’s threat and “allowed public pressure to rise for radical solutions.”

White also notes that since the recent release of videos purportedly showing the beheadings of journalists Foley and Sotloff by ISIS, Western governments — including Canada’s — have committed to greater action to try to suppress the terrorist group.

But White asserts that ISIS is not the persuasive threat it has been portrayed as.

“I’m not saying it isn’t dangerous — we all know its character and fanaticism. That’s plain to see. But it feeds on weakness,” said White. While its territorial gains are not insignificant, he says the areas ISIS has “gobbled up” are regions where it “found weakness.” White described these areas as places where the group was able to collaborate with local groups, “or places where Shia or Kurdish forces wouldn’t really fight for those areas.”



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This description certainly fits Mosul, where last spring the government troops suffered what a BBC reporter described as “a dramatic collapse of morale,” even though Iraqi security forces outnumbered ISIS fighters by more than 15 to one. This military meltdown was so catastrophic that former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki issued a sharp condemnation of the defenders on June 11, when he said: “The commanders who retreated and wavered must be punished.”

Maliki, whose term just ended this week, had warned that the consequences of the Obama administration’s backing of “rebel” forces in Syria would be an unprecedented disaster. In an opinion piece published by the *Washington Post* on April 9, Maliki — who was installed after the U.S. government’s “regime change” operation in 2003 — called for an end to all arms transfers heading into Syria, both to the “rebels” and to the Assad regime, which is being supplied by Russia and Iran.

“We have been mystified by what appears to be the widespread belief in the United States that any outcome in Syria that removes President Bashar al-Assad from power will be better than the status quo,” Maliki wrote. “A Syria controlled in whole or part by al-Qaeda and its affiliates — an outcome that grows more likely by the day — would be more dangerous to both our countries than anything we’ve seen up to now. Americans should remember that an unintended consequence of arming insurgents in Afghanistan to fight the Soviets was turning the country over to the Taliban and al-Qaeda.”

The rebel coalition fighting against the Assad regime in Syria has been supported by the U.S. government, and President Obama expressed hope in a news conference last April to “mobilize the international community to support” installing a new regime in Syria.

On May 21, 2013, when the Senate was considering a bill to authorize “critical support to the Syrian opposition through provision of military assistance, training, and additional humanitarian support,” Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.) warned his colleagues, nearly all of whom voted to send arms to Syrian rebels: “This is an important moment. You will be funding, today, the allies of al-Qaeda.”

Paul was obviously aware that elements of al-Qaeda were among the anti-Assad rebels, and that some of the U.S. aid sent to the rebels would undoubtedly find its way to these extremists. Since the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) operates in both Syria and Iraq, it is not surprising that U.S. aid to the rebels in Syria abetted the ISIS in its bloody campaign to take over much of Iraq.

Though the establishment press has largely attempted to downplay the role of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other jihadists in fighting Assad, there are exceptions. For example, *The Nation* published an essay on August 21 of this year, “How the War on Terror Created the World’s Most Powerful Terror Group,” which is an excerpt from *The Jihadis Return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising*, a new book by Middle East correspondent Patrick Cockburn. Cockburn noted the inconsistent policy the United States is employing by carrying out air strikes and sending in advisors and trainers to help beat back ISIS’s advance in Iraq, while doing practically the opposite in Syria, where U.S. policy is to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. Overthrowing Assad, coincidentally, also happens to be the policy of ISIS and other jihadists in Syria. Cockburn writes:

The reality of US policy is to support the government of Iraq, but not Syria, against ISIS. But one reason that group has been able to grow so strong in Iraq is that it can draw on its resources and fighters in Syria. Not everything that went wrong in Iraq was the fault of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, as has now become the political and media consensus in the West. Iraqi politicians have been telling me for the last two years that foreign backing for the Sunni revolt in Syria would inevitably destabilize their country as well. This has now happened.



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From al-Qaeda to ISIS, it seems that the terrorist groups that have become the most threatening to the interests of moderate Middle Easterners are those that our government has assisted, somewhere along the line.

President Obama will address the nation at 9 p.m. ET on Wednesday from the State Floor of the White House to share his plan to fight ISIS. (The White House prefers the abbreviation ISIL.)

After an interview on *Meet the Press* in which Obama referred to the terror group as ISIL, host Chuck Todd noted: "Obviously we refer to it at NBC News as ISIS. The Obama administration, president, says the word ISIL. The last S stands for Syria, the last L they don't want to have stand for Syria." The administration, apparently, would rather have the public forget that it backed ISIS in Syria as part of the anti-Assad coalition, while it is committed to fighting the terrorists in Iraq.

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