

Crisis in Iraq and Syria; emergence and empowerment of ISIS during Obama's presidency

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS is considered as a group stemmed from Al-Qaida and a branch thereof that was later on changed in its name in Iraq to Al-Nusra and then to ISIS; it possesses an approach identical to that of Al-Qaida in terms of its ideological and intellectual attitudes as well as its behavioral aspects. Having acquired the presidency tenure in the US with the slogan of "change", Obama took measures in line with changing the US's foreign policy approach following his power takeover. Amongst these changes, those brought about in Iraq can be pointed out. By changing the method of his foreign policy approach, Obama endeavored to reduce the range of his government's costs by pulling out the US's military forces and leaving Iraq on its own. In line with this, the present study tries investigating the history of ISIS, its backgrounds in Iraq and policies of Obama's government in Iraq, Syria's crisis and Obama's policies in respect thereto, ISIS's attack on Iraq and the international coalition against ISIS. However, the question that can be raised herein is that how has the adoption of such policies and interventions by Obama influenced the trend of the evolutions in Iraq and Syria? It is evident that such changes in the US's attitude towards the region have caused essential evolutions one of which is the opening of a scene for the intensification of the terroristic Takfiri groups like ISIS in the region, particularly Iraq and Syria.

Keywords: ISIS, Obama's presidency, Crisis in Iraq and Syria

Introduction

One of the most important recent evolutions in the Middle-East region is the emergence of such a terroristic group as ISIS within the format of the Islamic state of Iraq and Syria that was posited in the political and press circles as a new term following its empowerment by the crisis in Syria. ISIS is an armed terrorist group with Salafi-Jihadi mindsets and it is composed of Wahhabi, Salafi and Baath forces with the objective of its organizers being the restoration of what they call Islamic caliphate and canon's enforcement. Iraq and Syria are the main maneuvering zones of this terrorist group's operations. Besides having dominated vast parts of Syria, this ISIS group could take control of a substantial part of Iraq's west, including Mosul, the second largest city of that country, and other cities like Falluja, Ramadi, Tal Afar, Sinjar, Baiji and Hawija during June, 2014, by a sudden attack (Abd Khoda'ei and Tabrizi, 2015, p.152).

In regard of the international interventions, the role of the west, especially the US, in the emergence and empowerment of ISIS is very prominent. The advent and activities by Takfiri groups in Iraq can be attributed to the US's attack on Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 (Mohammadian and Torabi, 2015, p.255). Syrian crisis gave the US the opportunity of overt supporting of the groups at odd with Assad's government with the objective of Bashar Assad's overthrow and providing them with a lot of weapons. ISIS, as well, was amongst the groups empowered by the direct supports of the US and it could reveal itself as an active governmental actor and it can be possibly stated that the assistance of ISIS and its empowerment for the overthrowing of Syrian government and disintegration and weakening of Iraq have been parts of the US's middle-eastern strategy during Obama's tenure.

Like all the units inside the international system, Obama government, as well, seeks its own security and augmentation of its own profits and interests in various regions but it did not see the direct and hard presence and intervention as the method of supplying security and acquiring more interests and sought various strategies like threat balance (i.e. showcasing power and not applying force), soft war such as embargoes, vicarious wars, use of united forces and coalitions, shifting the international regimes towards gaining more control over the challenging and hostile units for supplying security and achieving its own interests. In applied terms, the present study looks for analysis for the Obama government's policies and interventions in Syria and Iraq and their effects on the emergence of ISIS based on the presumptions of the defensive realism theory. The analysis of Obama's performance in respect to Syria and Iraq can be also efficient in future for the investigation of the foreign policy of all the future US governments in regard of the Middle East Region.

Study's Theoretical Foundations ISIS's Backgrounds

The Islamic state of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is an Islamic radical group claiming the Islamic caliphate. As it is understood from its name, this group is active in Iraq and Syria. The initial nucleus of ISIS's formation was set in the aftermath of the US's attack on Iraq so it is not a novel phenomenon in Iraq. ISIS is one of these same Takfiri streams born out of such a Salafi school of Al-Qaida. After political, social and security crises in Syria and Iraq, this group could reserve itself a position in the region and become influential in the security equations of the west Asian region and even international environment (Kuhkan Bagheri and Bagheri, 2015, p.184).

The Takfiris' activities in Iraq were commenced by Abu Mas'ab Zarghavi who could absorb his forces predominantly from the Jordanians, Palestinians and Syrians who lived in Europe. After the US attacked Afghanistan, Zarghavi left it and escaped to Iraq's Kurdistan and joined the Salafi group of Ansar Al-Islam headed by Mulla Karikar; a short while later, Zarghavi established the group "Jama'at Al-Tawhid wa Al-Jihad" in 2003 with the objective of fighting against the US's invasion of Iraq and, having won Bin Laden's trust, he changed the name of the group to Iraq's Al-Qaida in October, 2004. After Zarghavi was killed in an air raid by the US, Abu Hamzeh Al-Mohajer shouldered the group's leadership. With the continuation of this group's activities, the Islamic State of Iraq was formed on 15th of October, 2006, following a meeting between a number of the armed groups in Iraq and Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi was appointed as its leader.

After Omar Al-Baghdadi was killed in 2010, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi became the Amir of Iraq's Islamic State (Mohammadian and Torabi, 2015, p.341). During Syria's domestic war that was followed by Bashar Assad's loss of governance over vast regions of the country, the combatants of Iraq's Islamic state like other Al-Qaida forces in the whole world were forced to go to Syria and could occupy some cities therein; they intended to weaken the authority of Assad's government in these cities (Sami'ei Esfahani and Sharif Bali'eh, 2016, p.162).

With the growing power of Al-Nusra front, Al-Baghdadi started to take control of this group and it was on 9th of April, 2013, that Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic state in Iraq, sent a voice message and announced the blending of Al-Nusra front and Iraq's Islamic state so that the group of "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" could be formed in this way (Abbasi, 2014, p.102).

Policy and Performance of Obama in Iraq

After Obama's victory in the election, he addressed the people and statesmen of Iraq in the following words: "American forces cannot go on patrol forever in Baghdad's streets and safeguard its security" (Yazdanfam, 2010, p.165). Therefore, Barack Obama declared during the first days that the war-based policies should be discarded and that the US should distance away from the war scene in Iraq. Obama kept emphasizing on the idea that war in Afghanistan was necessary but war in Iraq was not necessary. Obama realizes the US's attack on the US and Iraq as a deviation in this country's battle against terrorism and believes that the main battlefield of the battle against terrorism is Afghanistan and that the US and its allies should put their emphasis and concentrate on this region. Due to the same reason and in order to operationalize his election slogan, Obama took measures in line with pulling the American forces out of Iraq based on the US-Iraq security agreement which is abbreviated as SOFA.

Obama's Policy and Performance in Respect to Syrian Crisis:

The stances and performances of the US in respect to the Syrian crisis can be investigated in the following four periods:

1. Passive Functioning and Delegation of Affairs to the Regional Allies

When the people-driven and peaceful strikes were commenced in Syria during March, 2011, the Syrian police and security organs harshly treated them. At the time of the crisis occurrence and initiation of the demonstrations, the US's reaction was not much beyond the condemnation of the Syrian government's interventions. However, the US's movements against Syria were solely within the limits of advertisements.

2.US's Embargoes on Syrian Government:

The US's foreign ministry identified Syria in 1979 as a country supporting terrorism and the US subsequently cut many of its aids to this country and it has so far imposed several rounds of boycotts onto Syria. Furthermore, Barack Obama banned Syrian government and Bashar Assad himself in an executive sanction no.13582 during August, 2011. Based thereon, all the Syrian government's assets were blocked and all the American citizens were prohibited from trading and transacting with the Syrian government (Ahmad Khan Beigi, 2013, pp.1020-1022).

3.The Strategy of Supporting the Rebels in Syria:

The thing considered by the US was continuation of war therein because it could weaken the power of both of the groups engaged in war and decreased their future dangers and risks. Under such circumstances, the US placed aiding the Syrian rebels in its agenda but it adopted two approaches for doing so. The first was putting political pressure on the Syrian government, especially threatening it to apply chemical weapons against the dissidents which was posited by Obama as the US's red line. The second was sending financial and nonlethal military aids (including, vest, bullet-proof helmets, military and night-vision binoculars, walkie-talkie and telecommunication equipment, facilities for treating the injured and other equipment of the like) to the dissidents and offering intelligence assistance to them (Kushki, 2014, pp.8-9).

4.Threat and Military Assault against Syria:

The US was endeavoring to start military attack on Syria after the occurrence of chemical bombardment therein and the dissidents' claim for the government's use of chemical weapons against the people and, proposing human right topics and its intention for supporting the defenseless Syrian people against the government, it made efforts to foreground its role. The US placed limited attacks on certain targets in Syria in its agenda in line with weakening the power of this country's government without targeting Bashar Assad himself (Sajedi, 2013, p.147).

5.Agreement with Russia and Security Council's Resolution:

Under the conditions that the US's military attack on Syria had reached its sensitive point, the US and Russia declared it on 14th of September, 2013, that they have reached an agreement on the Russia's six-article plan. Based on this agreement, Syria had to declare the amount of its chemical weapons and hardware

and military equipment as well as its infrastructures within a week. After that, it had to take measures within a given timetable in six stages for destroying its chemical materials and facilities (Ahmadian and Bahrami, 2015, p.212). After a document was offered for determination of Syria's mechanism of immediate destruction of its chemical weapons, Barack Obama appraised Moscow's plan as positive and asserted that the military attack can be definitely ceased in case of the enforcement of the document's six stages by the Syrian government.

Syrian Crisis and ISIS's Empowerment

With the initiation of crisis in Syria and change in the nature of objections from political and civil to terroristic and sectarian subject to the effect of the media advertisements and psychological operations, numerous groups with Salafi and Takfiri inclinations entered Syria for exercising Jihad against its Alavi government. In the course of the Syrian crisis, heavy and voluminous psychological advertisements were made in line with the inducing of the Syrian war's being religious and sectarian. These psychological advertisements and operations caused a large number of Salafi Sunnis began pouring into Syria for exercising jihad with Alavis that are so-called as heretics by them; as decreed by their Salafi and Takfiri leaders and Muftis, Alavis are worse than the Jews and the Christians and shedding of their blood is allowed. The opponents of Syrian system were advertising the existence of a religious war for maximally increasing the motivations of their members.

International Coalition against ISIS

Following the progress and expansion of ISIS's military operations since 2013, the Iraqi government demanded the international community's support and intervention through aerial backup of the Iraq's army and in adherence to the international laws' principles without jeopardizing the lives of the civilians and veneration of the governance and territorial integrity of Iraq for fighting with this terroristic group and, after repeated requests by the Iraqi government, the first air raid was carried out in August 2014 by the US against ISIS in Iraq's territory. After this attack, the US government sought forming international coalitions for the accomplishment of this goal. In the end, a coalition comprised of 60 countries was established during three meetings (Jeddah, Paris and Security Council) against ISIS. The leadership of this coalition and its policies were shouldered by the US and the countries provided the coalition with their aids in the form of aerial support, military assistance and infantry procurement (Tabataba'ei and Shareq, 2016, p.180).

Obama's Strategy in the International Coalition Against ISIS

Obama's foreign policy in Syria and Iraq was seminally based on providing the Takfiri groups like ISIS with an opportunity to reach sufficient power and influence. However, with the ISIS's empowerment and its occupation of vast lands in Syria and Iraq and its transformation into a threat against Israel, on the one hand, and also with the emergence of a logical justification for the US's military presence in the region, Obama started forming an international coalition against ISIS based on a multilateralist approach it always adopts in resolving the international problems (Sadatinejad, 2016, pp.139-140).

Conclusion

The Takfiri and terroristic group of ISIS that was provided with a chance of entry into Iraq in the course of Bush government's attack thereon in 2003 was enabled to emerge and establish following Obama's enforcement of certain policies in the region and its pullout of the American forces from Iraq. Then, it was with the occurrence of crisis in Syria in 2011 that it could overtly declare its existence and a proper ground was subsequently set for its expansion of its activities as well as its empowerment. Since ISIS's activities in Syria were in line with the US's interests, i.e. weakening of the resistance front and supply of the Israel's security, and against Bashar Assad's regime, it was provided with a lot of financial, military, weaponry and intelligence supports by the US and its allies in the region. Following such financial and military supports and policies, ISIS could become more powerful day in day out and think of the conquering of the whole country; this terroristic group finally attacked Iraq on 9th of June, 2014 and it could rapidly occupy many regions of this country. With the continuation of the ISIS's empowerment and its movement towards Arbil

and Iraq's Kurdistan and Baghdad, the US started thinking about confrontation with ISIS and it finally formed a coalition against ISIS by its own headship. In line with the coalition's goals, Obama was not seeking to destroy ISIS but to decompose Iraq and overthrow Assad's government in Syria for weakening the resistance front and prevent the empowerment of this front; it was looking for an excuse for the US's presence in the region for managing the evolutions. Due to the same reason, the US exercised a highly paradoxical strategy in the international coalition against ISIS and the coalition was more of a showy nature than having a real and practical aspect against ISIS.

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