

The Challenges of ISIS  
and the Modern Nation-State

By

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## **Abstract**

### **Advisor: Professor Cigdem Cidam**

This essay examines the challenges that the so-called Islamic State, or ISIS, pose to the contemporary state system. The rise of ISIS in the territories of Iraq and Syria raises two fundamental questions, one conceptual the other directly political: First, ISIS's claim to be a state and world powers' resistance to this claim raises the question of what constitutes a state in today's international system. Second, as a unique form of political organization that has become successful in the Middle East in a relatively short time, ISIS raises a number of practical political questions such as, what it takes to defeat ISIS or, at least, to prevent it from spreading further around the region and world. The essay outlines the specific inner workings of ISIS and attempts to offer possible long-term solutions to the problems that ISIS has given rise to. I argue that a political organization can be considered a state only if it has territorial sovereignty, legitimacy, and international recognition. With this template, ISIS is much closer to being a state than any other terror network before it, but falls short of meeting all the necessary requirements for statehood. Because of this, the international community must deal with ISIS in a new and different manner compared to past strategies with groups such as al-Qaeda.

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I examine the issues that ISIS and the ongoing civil wars present to the international community. Terrorism is the major international issue of our generation and it would behoove us to better understand its origins and symptoms in order to prevent the further breakdown of state order currently ongoing in the Middle East. The ongoing relative success ISIS has enjoyed since it overran parts of Syria and Iraq in 2014 is directly correlated to the continuing breakdown of the nation-state in the Middle East. Furthermore, because ISIS claims to be a functioning state, it is thus undermining the 'legitimate' nation-state governments of not only Syria, but the rest of Middle Eastern states. To assess ISIS's claim to statehood, the first chapter outlines the western conceptions of the state dating back to the peace at Westphalia in 1648, which established the basis of modern international law, as the world knows it today. I will then examine what makes a state a state in this context while comparing my criteria with other political theorists. Through my engagement with thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, Lawrence Oppenheimer, and Alexander Wendt, I determine that a state is only truly a state if it has territorial sovereignty, legitimacy, and international recognition. This will serve as my basic criteria when I examine how far ISIS has come in becoming far more than just another terror group.

When introducing political theorists, I first begin at the peace of Westphalia and outline the first rudimentary conceptions of the modern state. It is with this basic understanding of a state that I then examine the work of Hobbes and his narrative of why humans need a sovereign to exit his violent state of nature. This is the point where international law enters the section and I discuss the implications of establishing a global state system that continues to dictate the nature

of international relations today. To further expand on the creation and substance of international law, I cite the writings of Lassa Francis Lawrence (L.) Oppenheimer, a 19<sup>th</sup> century German judicial member who many consider the father of modern international law. He raises the key point that state recognition ought to be done by the existing states through systematic criteria. However, Oppenheimer admits that politics and national self-interest often become the main determinant in the states decision instead of a clear and outlined process.

This raises questions regarding what to do with self-proclaimed states that do not fall into the typical Westphalian state structure and what the implications are for rejecting a new state on political grounds. I argue that while an aspiring state could have every major component of statehood, it cannot truly be considered a state if it does not gain international recognition because its rights, sovereignty, and legitimacy depend on the entity's overt entrance into the world of nations. Though this is largely unfair and arbitrary in a process that many, including Oppenheimer, believe ought to be uniformly defined, the arbitrary nature of the process is a simple reality in today's international world order.

This discussion serves as a theoretical background for me to make a case for the argument that ISIS should be considered more of a quasi-state than a traditional terror group. To support my theory, I outline the rise of ISIS, its governance capabilities, and state institutions. I also compare and contrast the group's actions with that of al-Qaeda in order to understand the evolving nature of terrorism. I argue that not countering ISIS will only set a precedent for other insurgent groups hungry for power and publicity. To adequately counter it, we as an international community must have a better sense of what ISIS is and how it works. While nobody is preaching that ISIS should be officially recognized if it is truly more like a state, this is meant show major differences between ISIS and traditional terror groups. Understanding these

important alterations will give the international community a better understanding on how to ultimately destroy ISIS.

The second chapter is where I discuss the rise of ISIS, its capabilities, and its institutions. This chapter examines the history of the group's founders, specifically Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who became the most prominent terrorist in the world thanks to his leadership of al-Qaeda in Iraq during the U.S. reconstruction efforts from 2004-2006. Once the U.S. withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2010, Iraqi sectarianism quickly reemerged, which combined with the growing instability in Syria, allowed for the remnants of Zarqawi's network to resurface. In Syria, I examine how popular protests associated with the Arab Spring devolved into the fractured endless civil war we see ongoing today. All this culminated into a perfect storm for ISIS to emerge and effectively take hold of a territory nearly as large as the British Isles.

My third chapter examines the governing ability of ISIS and compares and contrasts it with al-Qaeda. For instance, while al-Qaeda commonly carries out similarly gruesome suicide bombings in areas in which it is known to operate, they do not actively seek to govern large areas of territory and instead focus much of their resources on attacking western interests wherever they may be. ISIS on the other hand preaches more radical territorial ambitions. As I will show, ISIS is able to generate income through oil and taxing within their borders, which is a startling step in complexity for a terror group and gives further credence to the belief that ISIS is in fact a quasi-state. While some of these differences seem moot, they go a long way in demonstrating important differences between ISIS and other terror groups before them.

The fourth chapter delves into ISIS's online media and propaganda machine, which has been able to generate notoriety concerning their ability to communicate with possible recruits around the world. The evolution of the Internet is one of the most extraordinary moments in

human history and while the Internet provides a great amount of information and good for our society, we have been slow to react to perpetrators such as ISIS who seek to exploit this relatively new technology for their benefit. These exploitations come in the form of ISIS inspired social media accounts that seek to connect with youth all around the world for indoctrination purposes. Furthermore, with the Internet, ISIS has been able to paint a utopian portrayal of their territory and shift their messages to better culturally connect with international youths anywhere in the world.

The next chapter offers proposals on the basis of my discussions in previous chapters. This chapter is also where I make the case for a ground intervention in both Syria and Iraq. To sum, the rise of ISIS and the deteriorating civil wars go hand in hand; ISIS rose once the states of Iraq and Syria failed to provide their people with basic services and as long as ISIS exists, more groups will attempt to mimic its success and undercut weak states. Furthermore, the greatest recruitment tool ISIS's has is their territorial sovereignty, which allows them to profess themselves to be a state, which only further strengthens their fallacious messages. Thus, to defeat ISIS, the fledgling state institutions of the Middle East must be strengthened, which means to first end the civil wars and take away ISIS's territorial sovereignty.

In the following solutions chapter, I explain that due to the geopolitical entanglements we see today, the most likely way to mediate an acceptable solution for the major powers would be to partition Iraq and Syria into various sectarian spheres of influence. However, in order to convince the powers to meaningfully negotiate, the battlefield dynamics must be so no one party can reasonably attain outright victory. This would entail deploying U.S. and foreign troops to the region while empowering Arab states to also use their militaries to tilt the balance of power either in a positive or at the very least, neutral position. With a plan established, the international

community could then go about destroying ISIS and replace it with functioning and accountable state institutions. Using my definition of what ISIS really is as a base for my discussion, I will detail how such an operation will be conducted.

To close, I outline topics for future research that I was not able to cover in this work. The Middle East is an extremely volatile place with many moving parts and players. In such a geopolitically competitive region, issues between respective nation states always impact settlement negotiations. Furthermore, each country in the region can play an immensely important role in either helping institute much needed reforms or risk becoming the latest country to fade into civil war. Since the beginning of this writing, ISIS has even emerged outside of their self-proclaimed caliphate in Libya and Afghanistan and has launched deadly attacks in Paris. Libya specifically has become one of the largest terror safe-havens in the world and appears as if ISIS is attempting to emulate what they have accomplished in Syria and Iraq. A stand-alone thesis can be written about any one of these developments, as they require detailed, careful thought, and analysis.



# **Chapter I**

## **The Theory of the Nation-State**

Not only does ISIS pose a current and real danger to the Middle East and the world, their emergence also raises some theoretical questions regarding the current global state system. While world powers treat ISIS as a terrorist organization, ISIS claims to be a state. In what follows, I will explore the questions of whether ISIS should be considered more of a state than a terror group, or some sort of hybrid between the two. To do so, I will first address fundamental questions regarding the constitution of the modern world order and international system. I will argue that as a specific political organization, a state is based on the premises of territorial sovereignty, legitimacy, and international recognition. Based on this criteria and through researching how ISIS operates, organizes, and carries out its governing functions, I conclude that ISIS should be recognized as being much more sophisticated than any previous terror group. However, ISIS continues to have many shortcomings and inconsistencies in other areas that prevent it from attaining statehood in the theoretical sense. This will be made clear once the intricacies of territorial sovereignty, legitimacy, and international recognition are discussed. These theoretical questions are important to consider because they demonstrate how structurally different ISIS is from past terror groups. These divergences mean that defeating ISIS necessitates a series of new strategies compared to those implemented to defeat more traditional terror groups such as al-Qaeda.

### **Sovereignty and the Attributes of a State**

One of the most prominent theories of state building is Thomas Hobbes's social contract, which essentially says the sovereign is an all-powerful political entity created by the people through a social contract to ensure their own safety and security. Hobbes called a world without the sovereign a 'state of nature' and dubbed this world as short and brutish with humans constantly fighting with one another for power and security, the two attributes all humans

attempt to gain in their lives. Only through a power wielding sovereign, could societies be safe and out of the state of nature, as Hobbes wrote. Because the world in the state of nature is anarchic, the only way order could be brought back into the world was if a community of individuals came into an agreement among themselves to form an entity known as the sovereign who would monopolize all force and power. It did not matter to Hobbes what type of government the new order brought in, but only that he or they enforced the social contract established.

It would be revisionist and incorrect to assume Hobbes would expect and want a sovereign to be fair and democratic in the modern sense. The reality is that Hobbes's sovereign could be intimidating, autocratic, and brutal. While Hobbes never talked about a right to revolution, his account makes it clear that if the rulers failed to hold people true to their contract and establish security, they could lose their legitimacy. Hobbes essentially lived in such a state of nature in the English Civil War in the 1640's that saw a brief collapse of the English monarchy, which descended England into years of chaos until the monarchy was reestablished. His experiences living through this volatile time may also indicate why Hobbes had no preference on the type of government used, but instead only required one to be a strong and unequivocally undivided sovereign, capable of providing security and certainty to its people.

Hobbes was also living in a time of great uncertainty not just for England, but for all of Europe. In an attempt to end the numerous wars plaguing Europe and to establish some parameters for international relations, which since the fall of Rome up until the 1600's was dictated by anarchic warfare, the sovereigns from European countries met to negotiate a series of peace treaties. Theories of what constitutes a state date back centuries to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which marked the beginning of our contemporary conception of states. In the words of

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, “[t]he Westphalian peace reflected a practical accommodation to reality, not a unique moral insight. It relied on a system of independent states refraining from interference in each other’s domestic affairs” (Kissinger 2014, pg. 3). The premise of the peace rested on the acceptance that all states, regardless of their size, were obligated to respect the sovereignty and internal integrity of every state. While the peace treaty did not actually end war in Europe in the short or long term, it did lay the groundwork for the concept of sovereignty and international law as we know it today.

These norms established in 1648 are important for a number of reasons. The central element to keep in mind from this time was the mere creation of a set of norms that dictated how states interact with one another. Before, there were no criteria or avenues for international diplomacy to take place and the creation of such standards opened the door for more stability and a general benchmark for international behavior. Though this obviously did not completely do away with conflict between states, there is no doubt that the international community has steadily grown to accept the concept of international law and order. Westphalian order also established that states are expected to respect the authority of other states only when the state meets the basic criteria of statehood. In other words, states recognize the rights of other political organizations only when they meet the basic criteria of statehood.

The idea of international order was further developed by L. F. L. Oppenheimer, who is regarded by many as the father of international law. Born in Germany in 1858, Oppenheimer grew up amidst the unification of Germany and witnessed the British balance of power system at its height once he moved to Britain at the turn of the century. Like many, Oppenheimer believed and saw first-hand the necessity for an international order. In his book, *International Law*, Oppenheimer argues that a state must have obtained four conditions; to be considered a state the

political entity in question must have people, country, government, and sovereignty (Oppenheimer 1958, pg. 118). Oppenheimer defines sovereignty as a “supreme authority, an authority which is independent of any other earthly authority. Sovereignty in the strict and narrowest sense of the term implies, therefore, independence all round, within and without the borders of the country” (Oppenheimer 1958, pg. 117-118). Therefore, in order to be considered a sovereign state in the eyes of Oppenheimer, a state must have total control over its territory and people. Especially in our world today, which is increasingly defined by connections and globalization, this would imply that the state would not have to rely on other actors to either maintain control or carry out its basic functions.

Princeton Professor Janice Thomson defines sovereignty “in terms of the state’s ability to control actors and activities within and across its borders” (Thomson 1995, pg. 219) while Alexander Wendt calls it “a mutual recognition of one another’s right to exercise exclusive political authority within territorial limits” (Wendt 1992, pg. 412). If we were to implement these authors’ similar definitions of sovereignty, very few states would appear to meet their expectation of having control within their own borders. Nonetheless, both of these definitions bring the importance of other states’ perceptions into play. By claiming sovereignty is mutually recognized, Wendt is saying a state may only be considered sovereign if they conform to the norms of the international community similar to the ones outlined by Oppenheimer. Both Wendt and Thomson’s overarching message is that the definition of sovereignty and its role stems from the existing international norms already in place.

With that said, it is important to acknowledge the fact that norms change and the world today is very different from 1648 and even during Oppenheimer’s life. For instance, colonialism was rampant throughout the world and accounting for people and territories that were not truly

independent certainty blurred the lines of statehood and sovereignty. The realities of 1648 are even more outdated as monarchies were expected to govern all aspects of people's lives. While people living under monarchies sought stability and the ability to eek out a meager existence, people think of the state today as an entity that ought to provide services to the public.

Furthermore, thanks to the advent of democracy, societies expect the government to serve and listen to their needs. If modern states fail to do so, then they become scrutinized by its citizens and outside observers. The simple fact is societies expectations of the state have drastically changed over time in large part due to the world's expanded use of democracy and elimination of colonialism. However, the basic premises discussed above remain relevant and central to states existences and their overarching cooperation with one another. State cooperation remains possible out of the idea that in international law, states are entitled to equal rights and privileges while unrecognized states are entitled to nothing. In order to delineate between the two, states employ the doctrine of legitimacy.

### **The Necessity of Legitimacy**

One of the core principles of what makes a state a state is the role of legitimacy. Because the sovereign or proposed leader(s) of a state enter into a social contract with a people, the state has a set of basic expectations that must be met if the people are expected to submit to their will and laws. A failure to do so brings a state's legitimacy into question and opens the door for counter ideologies to be discussed. This is exactly what is playing out in the Middle East today. Since the modern state system was introduced to the Middle East, often happening without the total support of the people to begin with, the states have struggled to provide basic necessities such as security, electricity, roads, clean water, education, and general economic prosperity. Because the modern state has failed so many people, many are now seeking alternative state

systems. As Kissinger puts it, “[w]hen states are not governed in their entirety, the international or regional order itself begins to disintegrate” (Kissinger 2014, pg. 143). This brings us back to the issue at hand. If a state is not seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people, is it even at all a state?

Today, states at minimum, are expected to carry out the same functions as outlined in Hobbes’s account. Specifically, the idea of legitimacy remains a key component of states ability to function both locally and internationally. However, many people around the world still find themselves enveloped in Hobbes’s dreaded state of nature. To make matters worse, many states that do in fact control their territory fail to adequately provide basic services expected of them. In the Middle East specifically, states have become ineffective and corrupt, which gives people the sense that the state is not looking out for their basic interests. When issues arise such as corruption, it calls into question nearly every part of the state apparatus, which inevitably makes people both less trustworthy and supportive of the state. This is one of the gravest internal issues a state can face and this lack of internal legitimacy can lead to other internal actors proclaiming they can do a better job at governing than the current regime. Without this legitimacy, outside states are less likely to support the state in question due to the unpredictable nature of intervening in such civil conflicts.

In what could be an example of the changing global landscape, all ‘states’ certainly do not hold supreme sovereignty over their whole territory and those who do may actually be in the minority. For instance, the relatively young nations of Africa have repeatedly collapsed or been overthrown by rebel groups and coups and often fail to control their whole territories even in times of relative stability. Latin American governments have been forced to wrestle with powerful drug cartels that have shown ability to drive out government forces from various areas

such as in northern Mexico. As is being discussed in this paper, the Middle East is littered with “failed states” and those who do not control the whole of their territories. This fact raises interesting questions. For instance, it is universally accepted that Libya has now become a failed state. And yet, hardly anyone questions Egypt’s sovereignty in the Sinai despite the ongoing Islamic insurgency. What are the reasons behind this seeming double standard? The answers might stem from a matter of international convenience and geopolitical matters.

### **External Legitimacy as International Recognition**

In our world today, international recognition is the ticket towards gaining all the rights enjoyed by the international nation-state community. According to Wendt, “to the extent that their ongoing socialization teaches states that their sovereignty depends on recognition by other states, they can afford to rely more on the institutional fabric of international society and less on individual national means—especially military power—to protect their security” (Wendt 1992, pg. 415). This would mean that states merely recognize others based on how much they conform to the international system, which of course today means being a Westphalian state and recognizing all of its attributes. Wendt’s account also raises questions regarding the importance of having control over territory. By saying states can rely more on the institutional fabric of international society to establish their sovereignty, real events occurring within a given country have less importance than being initially accepted into the family of nations. Therefore, once a state is accepted, it can slide back into disarray knowing the international community will help restore its sovereignty even if the state may be inherently incapable of governing.

As this would mean that a state is accepted arbitrarily based on its intentions and not the potential reality that the state has total control within its borders, many obvious issues arise. This raises the questions as to how a state becomes recognized and who ought to determine such an



outcome. While Thomson acknowledges that it is unclear who has the ultimate power to 'officially' grant sovereignty, she says the state must be recognized by other states based on the modern state system currently in place. This distinction raises the debate surrounding internal and external sovereignty and its role, or lack thereof, in organizing the international community into a group of nations.

Oppenheimer unequivocally agrees with this assertion by saying "statehood alone does not grant or imply membership of the Family of Nations...A state is, and becomes an International Person through recognition only and exclusively" (Oppenheimer 1958, pg. 125). By not being included in the international community, or Family of Nations as Oppenheimer calls it, the excluded state's boundaries and legitimacy will not be recognized and the state overall will not be covered by international law. Thus, the unofficial state essentially lives in a Hobbesian state of nature in relation to other states with anarchy and uncertainty being the only norms. More importantly, unrecognized states do not receive protection or support from the international community and instead must resort to defending themselves.

Meanwhile, Oppenheimer says, "[w]hile the granting of recognition is within the discretion of the States, it is not a matter of arbitrary will but must be given or refused in accordance with legal principle." (Oppenheimer 1958, pg. 126) This means states ought to primarily examine whether the proposed state has all the necessary attributes to be a recognized state as seen through the international laws and norms currently established, which today stem from the events at Westphalia. However, Oppenheimer concedes, "[i]t is unavoidable that political considerations may from time to time influence the act or refusal of recognition" (Oppenheimer 1958, pg. 127). Even today, we see how petty politics and geopolitical concerns seep into discussions of whether to recognize new states. For instance, the debate over initiating

the newly declared state of Kosovo proved to be highly contentious in Serbia and other former Yugoslav republics.

Oppenheimer believes that an international body would be a better catalyst for officially recognizing new states. Though he wrote before the creation of the United Nations or the League of Nations before it, the absence of such a body meant the onus lay with the international community on the whole. Ironically, even with the United Nations, the recognition of states is still a highly political, contentious, and often confusing process. This has largely been due to the fact that UN members all have varying agendas to a certain degree and struggle to reach consensus thanks to states ability to veto resolutions. More often than not, vital UN legislation is almost always bogged down by Russian and Chinese vetoes stemming from geopolitical rivalries with other members. While organizations such as the UN can attempt to filter international competition out of nation's calculations, states will always prioritize their agendas over the general body and thus, questions of state recognition will persist. Until an institution free of geopolitical rivalry can be established, the world will have no defined and unbiased criteria to decide when to recognize a new state.

There are many scenarios in which a self-perceived new state can be established. However, the process of recognizing a new state born out of civil war is arguably the most difficult situation for states to agree on thanks to the many variables that come with civil wars. For instance, the parties involved, state of the government, and the root of the war all must be taken into account before deciding which side should be recognized. Or, it may be that no side deserves official recognition at all. Oppenheimer understands the importance and uniqueness of this situation by saying, “[r]ecognition is of special importance in those times where a new State tries to establish itself by breaking away from an existing state in the course of a revolution”

(Oppenheimer 1958, pg. 128). There is also the simple reality that the side the international community recognizes does not always come out on top as the winning side and the variables of military effectiveness must additionally be taken into account.

Oppenheimer believes that the course of the war plays a major role in state recognition and the timing of such an acknowledgement greatly matters. He says, “[f]or an untimely and precipitate recognition of a new State is more than a violation of the dignity of the mother-State. It is an unlawful act, and it is frequently maintained that such untimely recognition amounts to intervention” (Oppenheimer 1958, pg. 28). Essentially, Oppenheimer does not believe foreign states should recognize a potential new state in a civil war until the outcome is no longer in doubt. By doing otherwise would risk violating the sovereignty of the original pre-civil war nation, which is equivalent to intervening in a nation’s internal affairs. But as Oppenheimer even admits, state recognition will never be systematically methodical because one can never take self-interest out of state calculations. Furthermore, statesmen are often faced with choosing a side without all the facts being completely known. In the instance of Syria, it took over a year for the international community to officially conclude the Assad regime was using chemical weapons. On the other side, western nations complained about not being able to distinguish the true face of the secular opposition to the regime and thus chose not to assist them.

These recent challenges to the modern Westphalia system call into question the durability of the system when implemented in regions that lack historical familiarity with such practices. While nobody is predicting a collapse of the Westphalia system, it is important to remember that the system has only been implemented worldwide since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first time in history that the whole world was expected to govern themselves in a fairly uniform way, and has come into conflict with other cultures and their historic regional order conditions. Kissinger attempts to

tackle the issues of failing states in the Middle East by proclaiming “the state itself—as well as the regional system based on it—is in jeopardy, assaulted by ideologies rejecting its constraints as illegitimate and by terrorist militias that, in several countries, are stronger than the armed forces of the government” (Kissinger 2014, pg. 7). A clash between ideologies is nothing new in state affairs, but the state is put more at risk when the very same ideological challengers also possess more force than the government. This clash becomes even more potent in the Middle East because many of the ideological differences stem from longstanding religious disagreements. In addition to religious tensions, the longstanding economic stagnation many Middle Eastern countries have faced only adds more fuel to the fire among the many impoverished residents. These issues have only added more stress to the failing state institutions.

Many essays could be dedicated to answering the question as to why more states appear to be wrestling with insurgencies than in recent modern history. The question of territorial sovereignty has never been more in doubt, but states seem not to take the matter quite as seriously when considering recognizing a new state. For instance, South Sudan was introduced as a new state even though the new government showed no ability to control its new territory. Because of this apparent double standard, one should not discount an entity such as ISIS simply because they do not control their whole proclaimed territory if other states are not held to the same standard. Oppenheimer grapples with this dilemma by saying “these not-full sovereign States are in some way or another International Persons and subjects of International Law” because “sovereignty is divisible”, but acknowledges a lack of consensus on the subject (Oppenheimer 1958, pg. 119).

The dynamic that likely muddled the waters for Oppenheimer was the existence of colonial empires and how only a select few nations dictated global and regional affairs. Today,

there are far more non-state actors and the majority of them are not held to the same standards of other developed states. Therefore, there is no uniform or outlined internationally recognized criteria that states ought to meet in order to be considered a functioning institution worthy of statehood. This dilemma shows how important ones definition of sovereignty really are thanks to the lack of agreement over its importance. It also highlights how the rise of new third party actors calls into question the very definition of statehood and its attributes. The general health of the Westphalian nation-state gets further cast in doubt when it becomes shoddily implemented in a foreign society with no prior history of western style governance. This was the exact case in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Middle East with the arrival of European style governance.

### **Middle East and Islamic Tradition of the State**

Over the past 100 years, the Middle East has become familiar with the nation-state not through their natural development in theory or governance, but through forcible implementation from outside powers. Because the European colonial powers spectacularly failed in successfully reshaping the region under western norms, many people have lost faith in the whole system. This is the very situation many Middle East nation-states find themselves in. Kissinger believes “the Middle East seems destined to experience with all of its historical experiences simultaneously—empire, holy war, foreign domination, a sectarian war of all against all—before it arrives (if it ever does) at a settled concept of international order” (Kissinger 2014, pg. 97). The diverse nature of Middle Eastern states is a very real phenomena: Egypt is ruled by the military, Israel is a democracy, Turkey was democratic until recent presidential actions swung the country to autocracy, Jordan and Saudi Arabia have monarchies, and Iran is an self-proclaimed Islamic republic.

Throughout history and specifically since the conception of the Islamic Empire and the founding of Islam in the 600's, the Middle East has swung from small, tribal-based communities, all the way to the vast Ottoman Empire. As Islam spread around the Middle East and North Africa, an Islamic caliphate came into existence that was meant to spread Islam around the world. The area in which the caliphate ruled was referred to as *dar al-Islam* and was ruled purely by the teachings of Muhammad and implemented Islamic law, commonly known as the *sharia*. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, no inherently Middle Eastern state has filled the vacuum once filled by the Ottomans. According to Kissinger:

The response in key Muslim countries has been divided between those who have sought to enter the new state-based, ecumenical international order as significant members—adhering to deeply felt religious beliefs but separating them from questions of foreign policy—and those who see themselves as engaged in a battle over succession to universal authority within a stringent interpretation of the traditional Islamic concept of world order. (Kissinger 2014, pg. 103-104).

Though Kissinger's assertion is overly simplistic and ignores the detour European intervention played in shaping the region, it does illustrate the kind of limbo the Middle East currently finds itself in. It concurrently shows that there is a strong lack of regional consensus on the direction and type of state that is most desired and realistically attainable.

One of the largest counter forces to the modern state system in the Middle East has been the writings of Muslim Brotherhood scholar Sayyid Qutb, who flatly rejected the modern state system and called for the return of the Islamic caliphate. What brings credence to Qutb's argument is the fact that the Europeans deftly imposed the western state system onto the Middle East through an imperialist mandate and not through reason or some sort of Westphalian-style peace. As will be examined closely later in this essay, the forced implementation of western governance values on the Middle East with no cultural understanding of the region is one of the chief contributors to the chaos we see today. Instead, Qutb preached a more familiar rhetoric and

believed that Muslims ought to live under the Islamic law handed down to the prophet Muhammad, which Qutb saw as the general laws of nature. His beliefs clearly illustrate the great divide that exists between proponents of the secular modern state system and those who support Islamic fundamentalism. In *Milestones*, Qutb's famous piece rejecting the international system, he says:

He Who has created the universe and man, and Who made man obedient to the laws which also govern the universe, has also prescribed a Shari`ah for his voluntary actions. If man follows this law, then his life is in harmony with his own nature. From this point of view, this Shari`ah is also a part of that universal law which governs the entire universe, including the physical and biological aspects of man (Qutb 1962, pg. 58).

In this very strict interpretation of how man should govern one another, Qutb leaves no doubt that the laws of God trump the laws of man. Instead, Qutb describes the laws of man as a sort of brutish, Hobbesian level of nature by saying people must be freed “from the clutches of human lordship and man-made laws, value systems and traditions so that they will acknowledge the sovereignty and authority of the One True God and follow His law in all spheres of life” (Qutb 1962, pg. 25). Essentially, instead of having a sovereign body bring man out of the brutish and violent state of nature, the laws of God, which also govern nature and humanity, will bring people peace. In addition, because God was the creator of man and the universe “[i]t is also necessary that the same authority be acknowledged as the law-giver for human life” (Qutb 1962, pg. 25). This assertion leaves little debate in the eyes of a pure Islamic fundamentalist since other than the sharia or laws of God, there can be no other version of a state.

While Qutb does not reject the idea of a state, he flatly rejects the western secular state on the grounds that the law can only come from God. Because God cannot rule a state directly, someone must instead implement his laws. Thus, the rulers of the state must be well versed in the sharia. Ruling a state based on the laws of God bring into question how such a state would interact with its neighbors and whether it would recognize the sovereignty of others. Having a

religious institution rule a modern state is nothing new and history shows such states can be integrated into a global state system, such as Saudi Arabia. This begs the question of whether ISIS could ever potentially moderate to the point of reaching the basic minimum requirements to achieve recognized statehood. This question can be better addressed once ISIS's governing bodies and customs are discussed.

### **Turning Understanding into Action**

Throughout modern history, the international community has attempted to define both what a state really is and the conditions required for official recognition, but to no avail. Many theorists have attempted to answer this question through the years with a few commonalities. For instance, the ideas of territorial sovereignty and legitimacy are the bedrock of many statehood theorists, including Oppenheimer. Others examine the problematic nature of having states initiate new states based on political gains instead of basic realities of the regime in question. In a world with more states than ever before, this is particularly troubling and opens the door for non-state actors to proclaim themselves as certified entities when they may really be nothing more than criminals. Until the world has a more clear and uniform understanding on the criteria necessary to proclaim a new entity a state, the world will continue to see ineffective states be fruitlessly propped up by allies while terror and other criminal enterprises will argue they can govern better than failing states. This is exactly what the world has today with ISIS competing amongst feckless and unpopular Middle Eastern states.

Many people believe ISIS should not be credited with being anything more than being a barbaric terror group. However, it is important to study the group to better understand its strengths and weaknesses so that a more coherent and pointed strategy can be implemented to ensure its defeat. This means studying everything from ISIS's history, to its governing practices



and basic ideology. Once we have a better understanding on what ISIS really is, we could then categorize the group based on longstanding international norms that determine what exactly makes a state a state in today's global community. The subsequent chapters will attempt to support my assertion that ISIS is more than just a terror group by presenting both facts and analysis on strategies and events as they happened on the ground over the past five years.

I will argue that in light of studying the group's meteoric rise, ISIS's existence is a product of the Middle East's struggling governments and interreligious struggle compounded by incompetent and corrupt regional institutions. Because ISIS is proclaiming itself to be a state, it is imperative to not only categorically determine what exactly being a state entails in a traditional sense, but what it means in terms of ISIS's ultra religious ideology. Out of this research and thinking, I conclude that ISIS is a quasi-state that is clearly more than just a terror group, but struggles to uniformly and coherently govern its territory. In addition, ISIS is actively attempting to overthrow the established regional order through destroying neighboring countries and exporting terror around the world. An enhanced understanding on the inner workings of ISIS and an understanding of the external factors that led to its rise will go a long way in creating a strategy to eradicate ISIS from the world stage.

# **Chapter II**

## **The History of ISIS**

Throughout the last twenty years, ISIS has undergone numerous incarnations in various countries. Today, ISIS claims to operate in North Africa and as distant as Afghanistan. More notably, ISIS has now come to control nearly a third of both Iraq and Syria and is in the process of consolidating its territory into a modern day Islamic caliphate with the goal of spreading throughout the region, creating a single entity ruled through their particularly harsh view of Sharia law. While many policy makers, theorists, and religious scholars debate how to best counter its rise, many still harbor confusion and disagreement over how ISIS managed to plunge the Middle East into its most severe modern crisis. Before solving the problem that is ISIS, it would benefit the international community to first understand the reasons behind its emergence, many of which helped foster the barbaric culture the world has now come to know and fear. This chapter will examine the evolving goals of ISIS and the major turning points in its quest to become a functioning state. Furthermore, I will argue that through miscalculations by two U.S. presidents, an inattentive Europe, and politically fractured Middle East, ISIS has been able to grow its roots in Iraq and Syria. To do so, this chapter will begin back when the mere thought of ISIS was still a fantasy.

### **From Prison Talk to al-Qaeda**

Years before the birth of ISIS or any modern jihadist group, its eventual founder and leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi came across radical Islam merely by chance and not through his own doing. Born in the Jordanian town of Zarqa, Zarqawi was widely known as a violent street thug who picked fights with students and was believed to be an alcoholic (Warrick 2015, pg. 50). Only through desperation to reign in their son did Zarqawi's parents send him to religious school where he then became exposed and obsessed with propaganda videos showing the mujahedeen's struggles to liberate Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. These followers perceived the events

in Afghanistan as yet another instance of oppression from western nations. Now fully engulfed in radical Islam, Zarqawi decided to travel to Afghanistan towards the end of the conflict in 1989 to continue the fight and drive out the Soviets (Warrick 2015, pg. 51).

While in Afghanistan, Zarqawi witnessed the latter days of the insurgency against the Soviet Union, but never made his way to the front line due to the Soviet withdrawal from the country. More importantly, Zarqawi's time in Afghanistan connected him with fellow Jordanians and also led him to become acquainted with Osama bin Laden's growing following. However, bin Laden declined to personally meet with Zarqawi until he traveled back to Afghanistan later in 1999 (Zelin 2014, pg. 1). One of the most important developments that came out of Zarqawi's trip to Afghanistan was ironically his return to Jordan in 1993, a country that was nearly unrecognizable to him. According to Warrick, "while Amman and the other big towns had grown larger and more modern, Zarqawi and his comrades had traveled backward in time by journeying to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, a place that by almost every measure lagged centuries behind the rest of the world" (Warrick 2015, pg. 53). This contrast in culture only fueled his outrage over Jordan's secularization and dislike towards the Jordanian monarchy and state.

One of these clerics Zarqawi successfully connected with while in Afghanistan was Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a Jordanian Salafi Jihadi writer whom the Pentagon in 2006 called the "most important new thinker in the jihadi intellectual universe" (Warrick 2015, pg. 20). After returning to Jordan, Zarqawi and other Jordanian veterans of the Afghan War sought out Maqdisi and led daily meetings and eventually organized into various sleeper cells around Amman. According to Joby Warrick, Maqdisi "denounced secular Arab regimes as anti-Islamic and called for their destruction" (Warrick 2015, pg. 20). Maqdisi once said, "If someone is elected because he wants to serve the people, that's being a good Muslim. But if he believes in democracy—if he

believes in rules made by men—he is an infidel” (Warrick 2015, pg. 21). This strict and blunt thinking was the ideology Zaraqawi and others were exposed to and would eventually become one of the core principles of ISIS today.

In 1994, Zaraqawi and his band of veterans finally found new purpose in Jordan with the Israeli-Jordanian peace deal, which outraged many fundamentals in the country that believed Israel had no legitimacy in the Arab world. In response, Zaraqawi and Maqdisi planned to attack numerous Israeli border outposts, but failed once the Jordanian secret police intervened days before the attacks were to take place. Though this appeared to be the end of their group, Zaraqawi was able to flourish during his years in prison and turned into the hardened leader that would one day wreak havoc in Iraq. While at al-Jafr prison, which was known for housing the most dangerous inmates in deplorable conditions, an unmistakable dynamic became apparent. Thanks largely to his discipline and regimented demeanor, Zaraqawi quickly ascended to becoming Maqdisi’s second in command and acted as the enforcer who kept the rest obedient. According to Warrick, “Maqdisi told the men what to think, but his number two [Zaraqawi] controlled everything else: how the men spoke and dressed, which books they read and which television shows they watched, whether they accepted or resisted prison dictates, when and how they fought” (Warrick 2015, pg. 20).

The combination of Maqdisi’s ideological tutelage and Zaraqawi’s stern discipline and evolving leadership skills led to many new followers within the overcrowded prison until his eventual release in 1999, when Zaraqawi was mistakenly included in an amnesty program led by Jordan’s newly crowned King Hussein. This was based on the long tradition that “new kings are expected to declare a general amnesty in the country’s prisons, granting royal pardons to inmates convicted of nonviolent offenses or political crime” (Warrick 2015, pg. 42). Middle Eastern

prisons continue to be one of the leading places of radicalization and such a setting will play a major role in numerous other countries in the 2000's and even today.

While not exclusive to only the Middle East, prisons around are grappling with the reality that many who turn to radical Islam are often recruited while serving prison sentences that have little or no correlation to religiously fueled terror. In the case of the Middle East, many of the prisons are overcrowded and have fallen into severe disrepair. One prime example of such as prison can be found at the al-Jafr prison, which is also where Zarqawi and Maqdisi were able to generate a large prisoner following. Located in the middle of the desert and once even closed in 1979 due to its wretched conditions, the prison gained more notoriety once hundreds of Palestinian militants and radicals were quarantined in the prison. According to Warrick, “[h]undreds of men, many of them held without formal charge, languished in stifling, vermin-infested cells where they endured temperature extremes, rancid food, and a catalog of abuses later documented by United Nations investigators” (Warrick 2015, pg. 15-16). To make matters worse, prisoners were often housed in overcrowded cells, thus allowing radical preachers to connect with others. It is no wonder that in this brutal environment with violent prisoners being held with no formal charge amongst radical preachers that prisoners turn into jihadists.

Other examples of radicalization in Middle Eastern prisons can be found in Iraq during the U.S. war, where thousands of young Iraqis were imprisoned based on sometimes-flimsy associations with known terrorists. One such former prisoner who was believed to be a low level associate of al-Qaeda in Iraq was current ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. While it is unknown how much of an influence his time in prison played towards his radical transformation, the reputation of Iraqi prisons certainly only fueled radicalization. To further compound the issue,

the revelations of severe prisoner mistreatment at the U.S. run Abu Ghraib only fueled more radicalizations within prison walls.

Even European prisons, most notably in France, have had to grapple with how to stop radicalizations. According to Farhad Khosrokhavar, an Iranian sociologist living in Paris, prisoners are “born again”: “Through jihadism, they transform the contempt of the others.... Once they become jihadists, people fear them. One of them told me, ‘Once they fear you, they cannot be contemptuous toward you anymore’” (Packer 2015). This sentiment is seconded by a prisoner only known as J.-P., whom was interviewed by George Packer of *The New Yorker*.

According to Packer’s interview:

J.-P. described the mind-set of some of his fellow-inmates: “I’m in prison, the state is to blame—it pushed me to live this life.” Prisoners watch a lot of TV news, and see war and death in Muslim countries. Someone like Coulibaly [one of the Charlie Hebdo attackers], J.-P. said, starts to “mix all this together” and create his own ideology, then “runs across a bad person who influences him.” One former prisoner I met in the 93 explained that Islamists target the *fragiles*, psychologically weak inmates who never receive visits. They are offered solace, a new identity, and a political vision inverting the social order that places them at the bottom (Packer 2015).

This account would tend to support the notion that radicals are easily able to connect with disillusioned criminals and unite against their home country. This would be especially true in cases where prisoners are housed in horrid and tight conditions that force them to interact with potential radicals. Furthermore, until states can effectively distinguish and separate common criminals from radical Islamists, the threat of radicalization in prisons will remain.

Shortly after his release, Zarqawi traveled to Afghanistan in 1999 with the hope of once again joining the growing mujahedeen and to meet with Osama bin Laden. To his surprise, bin Laden refused to even meet with him largely because as put by one of bin Laden’s senior deputies, “In a nutshell, Abu Musab [Zarqawi] was a hardliner when it came to his disagreements with other fraternal brothers” (Warrick 2015, pg. 66). From the beginning of their

relationship, it was clear that bin-Laden and Zarqawi were not cut from the same cloth of radical extremism.

According to Aaron Zelin of *The Washington Institute For Near East Policy*, aside from the obvious socioeconomic background differences between the two, “Zarqawi’s criminal past and extreme views on takfir (accusing another Muslim of heresy and thereby justifying his killing) created major friction and distrust with bin Laden when the two first met in Afghanistan in 1999” (Zelin 2014, pg. 1). In addition to Zarqawi’s unabated willingness to harm Muslims if need be, “Zarqawi’s brash personality and belief that authority is derived from those on battlefield front lines rather than behind the scenes would create even more tensions” once the Iraq war began (Zelin 2014, pg. 2). Even with all these reservations, bin Laden still eventually brought on and funded Zarqawi because al-Qaeda was looking to establish cells around the Levant to launch attacks onto Israel, whose destruction was apart of bin Laden’s core beliefs.

Because of these reservations, instead of welcoming Zarqawi into the fold officially, bin Laden gave him money to run a camp in western Afghanistan, far from al-Qaeda’s strongholds along the Pakistani frontier. Essentially, bin Laden believed Zarqawi was a hothead with the wrong objectives. Bin Laden’s main priority was to “liberate” supposed occupied Muslim territories and drive out “apostate” Arab regimes. But as Zelin points out, “[t]o achieve these goals, however, it first had to cut off the head of the snake—the United States and the West” (Zelin 2014, pg. 2). However, after numerous al-Qaeda offshoots were created in the mid-2000s, al-Qaeda shifted its focus to backing local plots to enhance its efforts to attack Western targets (Zelin 2014, pg. 2). Zarqawi on the other hand wanted to primarily overthrow Arab states that did not preach “pure” Islam, and exported western cultural values and governance. Though Zarqawi identified his home country of Jordan as one such state, he did not openly act towards



creating a new and encompassing Islamic state until the beginning of the Iraqi insurgency (Zelin 2014, pg. 2). This divide in thinking would never be bridged and would only exasperate tensions between the two emerging radical Islamist strains in the future.

### **Al-Qaeda and the Iraq War**

As was the case almost everywhere during this time, the attacks on 9/11 changed the whole global dynamic and this was nowhere more apparent than in the Middle East. Along with al-Qaeda's main camps in the east, American aircraft swiftly bombed Zarqawi's enclave in the west. Once again without a home and abandoned by bin Laden in his dash to Tora Bora, Zarqawi and his small band of followers decided to hide out in the autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq along the Iranian border, a place where they would go unnoticed thanks the region's autonomy gained from the Gulf War in the early 1990s. From this point forward, the fate and prosperity of Zarqawi and his small band of followers would largely be steered by the side effects of American intervention, politics, and sheer luck.

While analysts still largely disagree on the concise rationale for invading Iraq in 2003, one can point to a combination of bad intelligence regarding Saddam Hussein's alleged nuclear weapons program, flimsy (what turned out to be none) ties to al-Qaeda, and a idealistic claim calling to rid the world of a brutal dictator who had murdered hundreds of thousands of his own people. While the third reason cannot be disputed and Hussein once had a potent nuclear program, his alleged ties to al-Qaeda should have been easily cleared out as completely false. There was a persistent belief among members of the Bush administration such as Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell that Iraq must be invaded no matter what the contrary evidence may be. While Zarqawi's group was operating in Iraq, it did not need to take an invasion to wipe them out. According to a CIA team that had been surveying the group then

called Ansar, on the ground in Iraq, “Ansar al-Islam was a terrorist organization with an ambitious international agenda. It was harboring dozens of Arab militants with known links to al-Qaeda... it possessed chemical poisoning that could be use with horrifying effect...But the threat in its entirety could be erased” with a single airstrike on their compound (Warrick 2015, pg. 90). Secretary of State Colin Powell went to the UN and said, “Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda lieutenants” and thus, Iraq was shortly invaded (Warrick 2015, pg. 95).

By promoting Zarqawi as a dangerous terrorist leader collaborating with Hussein and bin Laden, the US inadvertently rocketed Zarqawi from an aspiring leader of a small isolated group, to the symbol of Arab resistance against the American invasion. With this new fame and now overt support from al-Qaeda, Zarqawi saw an influx of thousands of volunteers from all over the Arab world and wealthy donors from the Gulf States were eagerly willing to fund his enterprise, which then became al-Qaeda in Iraq and years later, ISIS. To make matters worse, the U.S. decided to fully disband the Iraqi army and ruling Ba’ath Party, sending thousands of former predominantly Sunni soldiers and generals onto the street, who would eventually find their way to Zarqawi’s resistance. In their place, a predominantly Shia army was assembled as Sunnis largely boycotted elections that brought in a Shia government. Many Sunni tribesman and people saw these new leaders as “thieves and bandits whose true allegiances lay with Iran” (Warrick 2015, pg. 124). The long term effects of this decision are still felt today as many Sunni tribesman and former government officials now hold senior leadership positions within ISIS.

Once the post-invasion plans of Iraq began to unravel in 2004, Zarqawi’s goal of ridding the region of “unholy” Muslims from power and expelling American from the region began to resonate with Sunni Iraqis. During the early stages of the insurgency, Iraq did not have a new

government and was instead governed by Americans in a transitioning phase. The disastrous decision to completely disband the Sunni dominated Iraqi military and governing apparatus only strengthened the narrative of a western occupation and to further compound the issue, the U.S. military was not adequately trained nor supplied to govern and rebuild a fractured country. According to Warrick, “[y]ears later, CIA officials who were brought into the final planning for the March 2003 invasion expressed astonishment at the lack of forethought on how the country would be managed after Saddam Hussein’s deposal” (Warrick 2015, pg. 117). This combination of poor western administered governance and total occupation played directly into the hands of Zarqawi and bin Laden. Additionally, because the government Zarqawi sought to overthrow and replace with Sharia law was American controlled, bin Laden gave him his full support since his universal goal was to rid the Muslim world of western influence. In addition to bin Laden privately strengthening ties with Zarqawi’s operation, bin Laden sought to brand the insurgency as an al-Qaeda master strategy and allowed Zarqawi to name his group al-Qaeda in Iraq (hereafter referred to as AQI) However, as the insurgency progressed and became more brutal, cracks would begin to show in their relationship.

Over time, Zarqawi launched brutal attacks on Shia neighborhoods that often led to the destruction of ancient mosques and resulted in thousands of dead civilians. Prominent clerics were assassinated, Shia were indiscriminately killed and those who assisted the Americans were often beheaded, a popular form of execution for Zarqawi. According to General Stanley McChrystal, “Zarqawi aimed to get Iraqis to see each other as he saw them...they were either fellow believers or an enemy to be feared and, in that fear, extinguished” (Warrick 2015, pg. 135). The sectarian violence that was ensuing along with the new Iraqi government and American forces inability to prevent the daily bloodshed led to an all out civil war. With the

backing of Iran, “Shiite self-defense militias, some of them just as vicious as Zarqawi’s thugs, seized control of entire neighborhoods and waged running duels with U.S. troops as well as Sunnis” (Warrick 2015, pg. 135).

During this time, tensions between Zarqawi and bin Laden hit a boiling point. Angered by Zarqawi’s indiscriminant attacks on Muslims, bin Laden sent stern orders to Zarqawi to stop tarnishing al-Qaeda’s image among the local Muslim population and to seek final approval before any further operations (Warrick 2015, pg. 201). In the wake of a deadly Jordanian wedding bombing orchestrated by Zarqawi, bin Laden sent his closest advisor to Iraq, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, who reportedly “cautioned Zarqawi against mistakes that had brought down other jihadist movements that alienated themselves from local populations” (Warrick 2015, pg. 201). The deep distrust between bin Laden and Zarqawi coupled with AQI’s brutal and indiscriminate bombing campaign did in fact eventually isolate much of the Sunni base that had once readily supported the insurgency.

Statistically, since 2004, al-Qaeda’s favorability rating among Iraqi Sunnis has plummeted, thus making the US and Iraqi government far more attractive alternatives even with all their shortcomings. Furthermore, according to a 2013 Pew Research Center poll that surveyed nearly 9,000 Muslims in 11 countries, the median level of disapproval of al Qaeda was 57 percent. However, in many countries, the number was far higher: 96 percent of Muslims polled in Lebanon, 81 percent in Jordan, 73 percent in Turkey, and 69 percent in Egypt held an unfavorable view of al Qaeda (Cronin 2015). While some may have shown their disapproval due to lack of results in ridding the Middle East of western influence, one can argue with a high degree of certainty that such disapproval has come out al-Qaeda’s brutality stemming from the

Iraqi insurgency and the fact that the group has done far more harm to the countries within which they operate as oppose to successfully striking western targets on a regular basis since 9/11.

However, the direction of the Iraq war materialistically turned when the U.S. began prioritizing intelligence gathering and special operations over a conventional war strategy. To do this, President Bush authorized what came to be known as “the surge” which sent thousands more troops to Iraq. This also meant using more Special Forces troops for pinpoint night raids that targeted Zarqawi’s lieutenants and other top associates. Most importantly, many of the Sunni tribes that initially had welcomed Zarqawi began to turn on him as his brutality began to isolate the group from the Iraqi Sunnis. The fact that Zarqawi and many of his closest leaders were Jordanian and Saudi gave the Iraqis a greater belief that he was not truly looking out for their interests. As a result, many turned to the U.S. The reversal of the war was also accelerated when Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2006 and his successors failed to push back against the U.S.-Sunni alliance. It was with this strategy that helped to stabilize Iraq and appeared to end the war in Iraq for good, or as the world thought.

In the years between the U.S. surge and final withdrawal in 2011, the U.S. was able to eradicate much of Zarqawi’s former AQI network. Much of the success can be attributed to the U.S.’s ability to bring Sunni tribes back into the fold often through payments and promises of long-term government inclusion and autonomy, which many Sunnis saw as the best alternative compared to the indiscriminant killings occurring throughout the country. The emphasis on intelligence gathering over outright conventional warfare severely crippled key leadership within both AQI and Shia militias, which conversely helped lead to their diminishment. However, while the surge guaranteed relative Iraqi stability in the short term, the general premise on having a

more inclusive central government would have to happen over the span of many years, something that both the U.S. and Iraqi government failed to fully realize.

### **Revolution and Civil War**

By December 31, 2011, the day the final American troops left Iraq, the remnants of Zarqawi's group, which was now called the Islamic State of Iraq led by an Islamic scholar by the name of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi kept a low profile throughout Baghdad and the surrounding areas in Iraq. No longer able to carry out massive campaigns on American soldiers or Shia mosques, they attempted to regroup. However, the group was plagued with a series of setbacks in the areas of recruitment, funding, and overall lack of vision due to the newly found relative stability in the country until the Maliki government began to renege on the pledges of inclusion. This along with President Bashar al-Assad's severe crackdown on peaceful protesters calling for a wave of democratic reforms in the midst of the Arab Spring sweeping the region, allowed for Baghdadi and his group to plot their next move with a new found purpose.

The introduction of the Arab Spring to the Middle East in 2011 changed the whole landscape and thinking in the region, and not necessarily for the better as so many once thought. While the democratic roots of the struggle breathed secularization into countries that had been micromanaged by selfish despots and their families for decades, democracy ultimately failed to fill the vacuum left from the series of revolutions that swept the region. In Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria, protestors rallied for change with varying initial degrees of success.

Once the Arab Spring swept into Syria, thousands of protestors calling for reforms were met with little fanfare, but as the movement that had originated in Homs grew around the country, the Assad regime fiercely cracked down with military force, torture, and intimidation. According to Frederic C. Hof, a former U.S. Army expert and envoy specializing on the Middle

East, “[t]he country’s [Syria’s] problems were being exacerbated by a general impression that Damascus elites were literally making out like bandits...If he had handled reform and pretexts smartly, he could have had himself crowned emperor of Syria” (Warrick 2015, pg. 229). This turned a once peaceful protest with the hope of economic and political reforms into a full-fledged rebellion seeking total regime change. However, the majority of the protesters, which included students, scholars, engineers, and farmers could not self sustain or orchestrate a full military campaign against daily airstrikes and tank columns being sent by Assad. Even after numerous generals, soldiers and pilots defected to the opposition and helped form the Free Syrian Army (hereafter referred to as FSA), the rebels were poorly supplied for a long duration war. This proved especially true in the face of the brutal crackdown by the regime, which included daily airstrikes on urban civilian areas and kidnapping family members of rebel fighters and activists.

It was in this chaos and desperation that Baghdadi’s fighters in Iraq saw their opportunity to regain traction and sent an expedition into Syria to set up a network in the country with the blessing of al-Qaeda’s central leadership. Led by a Syrian known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani, this group began to recruit fighters and establish cells throughout the country and was known as al-Nusra Front. Even though ideologically, the moderate rebels shared no interest in al-Nusra’s goal of establishing sharia law in Syria, Assad remained the main enemy and they largely avoided conflict with each other in the early years of the conflict. Additionally, because al-Nusra was well funded by al-Qaeda leadership and had seasoned fighters, the group was able to gain traction among those who opposed the regime.

However, even as al-Nusra flourished, issues would arise between Baghdadi and al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri that would eventually lead to the schism between al-Qaeda and ISIS. On 8 April 2013, al-Baghdadi released an audio statement in which he announced that al-

Nusra Front had been established, financed, and supported by the Islamic State of Iraq, and that the two groups were merging under the name "Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham" (ISIS). Al-Julani issued a statement denying the merger, and al-Zawahiri soon ruled against the merger, and appointed an emissary to oversee relations between the two sides to put an end to tensions. That same month, al-Baghdadi released an audio message rejecting al-Zawahiri's ruling and declaring that the merger was going ahead. Officially, al-Qaeda disavowed al-Baghdadi and ISIS in February 2014, but Zawahiri quietly attempted to disband the group as early as the fall of 2013, a few months after the al-Nusra dispute began.

Much of their differences stemmed from each sides master plan of Syria. According to Warrick, “Baghdadi wasn’t chiefly concerned with installing an Islamist government in the Syrian or Iraqi capitals. The goal was to impose Islamic rule without borders, and the way to achieve this was to act boldly” (Warrick 2015, pg. 252). Al-Qaeda on the other hand believed in a more pragmatic approach and “spoke of the caliphate as a distant goal, one that would have to wait until the Middle East’s secular regimes could be toppled” (Warrick 2015, pg. 252). According to one U.S. official, “He [Baghdadi] was talking about physically restoring the Islamic caliphate in a way nobody else did” while al-Qaeda preached a more revolutionary and “popular vote” approach (Warrick 2015, pg. 252). It was this in the moment thinking that compelled Baghdadi and ISIS into believing that territorial gains ought to be their highest priority.

Meanwhile, during this time, ISIS began to flourish in both Syria and Iraq and would culminate with their blitz in early 2014. Leading up to their 2014 summer offensive, Baghdadi ordered a series of raids throughout Iraq’s most notorious prisons such as Abu Ghraib that housed hundreds of veteran fighters from the Iraqi insurgency. This was the first of many



instances of ISIS taking advantage of Iraq's weak and greatly mismanaged security apparatus, a theme that continues to the present day. By the beginning of 2014, ISIS had become one of the strongest opposition groups and controlled neighborhoods in Aleppo, Homs, and many eastern cities no longer under control of the regime. Much of their success can be attributed to their strategy of targeting moderate rebel groups such as the FSA and avoiding large battles with the better equipped Assad regime. The tendency to target the weaker moderate rebel groups and avoid large confrontations with Assad was also one of the many philosophical differences between ISIS and al-Qaeda's al-Nusra Front, which primarily focused their forces on defeating Assad's military.

As ISIS became the dominant non-Assad force in Syria, the group then began taking advantage of the worsening sectarian issues reemerging in Iraq. The combination of the sectarian situation unfolding in Syria and the already inflamed tensions between Sunni tribes and the Shia dominated Iraqi government reached a fever pitch once marginalized Sunni tribes began aligning themselves with ISIS leadership beginning in 2012 and 2013. The majority of these tribes were the same ones who had rallied with the U.S. in 2007 and 2008 during the surge campaign to drive out AQI. However, over the past few years and especially after the US withdrawal, the Maliki government reneged on many of their promises of autonomy, thus driving the Sunni tribes over to supporting ISIS in its impending fight against the Shia government.

When examining whom to blame for the sudden swing towards a renewed sectarianism in Iraq, one cannot possibly leave out the actions of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. According to Ali Khedery, chief executive of the Dubai-based Dragoman Partners, "[o]f all the main forces, perhaps the single most corrosive was Maliki, a duplicitous and divisive politician who served as prime minister beginning in 2006" (Khedery 2015). From 2003-2009, Khedery was the longest

continuously serving American official in Iraq and has known Maliki for over ten years. However, by 2010, Khedery urged Vice President Biden to withdraw support from Maliki because “if he remained in office, he would create a divisive, despotic and sectarian government that would rip the country apart and devastate American interests” (Khedery 2014). While Maliki demonstrated strong leadership and mediated very difficult disputes between Sunni and Shia groups from 2006-2008 that helped turn the tide of the war, U.S. officials had to essentially babysit Maliki during this time. This included weekly videoconferences with President Bush and near daily meeting with American military and diplomatic officials (Khedery 2014). However, after Maliki’s party lost parliamentary elections in 2010, he openly blamed the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Britain for rigging the elections.

When Khedery returned to Iraq after the elections, he “was shocked that much of the surge’s success had been squandered by Maliki and other Iraqi leaders” (Khedery 2014). In addition to himself, officials including Deputy U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford, U.S. generals, British Ambassador Sir John Jenkins, and Turkish Ambassador Murat Özçelik each lobbied hard against Maliki, disagreeing with the White House and Maliki’s most ardent supporter, future Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Brett McGurk (Khedery 2014). Shortly after the elections, Maliki purged the majority of Sunnis from their government posts and significantly expanded the roles of his office. Khedery was so outraged by the administration’s decision not to object to Maliki that he resigned shortly after and concluded, “[b]y looking the other way and unconditionally supporting and arming Maliki, President Obama has only lengthened and expanded the conflict that President Bush unwisely initiated” (Khedery 2014).

Thanks to the combination of available seasoned fighters from the insurgency, a mismanaged security apparatus, a marginalized Sunni population, and the raging civil war in

Syria, ISIS was able to launch a ground offensive in 2014 that gained them the Iraqi cities of Mosul, Tikrit, and Fallujah and completely overran the Iraqi military in the process. According to Aaron Edwards, “ISIS has had to take into account the guiding hand of the Ba’athist elites who found themselves excluded from post-2003 Iraq. It is no accident that the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, may have had military training, probably as a conscript in the Iraqi Army” (Edwards 2015). Baghdadi values these former Ba’athist generals so much that he empowers them as his top two deputies as well (Edwards 2015).

The importance of the fall of the Iraqi military cannot be overstated. This massive embarrassment led to major changes within the Iraqi government and also changed the complexion of the battlefield in the sense that the government became forced to rely on Shia and Kurdish militias to defend Baghdad and the rest of the country from ISIS. Barry Posen, an MIT political science professor, raises two major developments that came out of such a major defeat. Posen says, “[i]f the Iraqi Army has evaporated, or perhaps more accurately deteriorated into a collection of local militias and palace guards, then the U.S. “re-training” mission in Iraq is vastly more difficult than we have been led to believe” (Posen 2015). Currently, there are roughly 3,500 U.S. military personnel in Iraq training the Iraqi army, a fraction of the roughly \$25 billion in resources used to build up the one that disintegrated in 2014 (Khedery 2015). Furthermore, Posen argues the other major development to come out of this was the Iraqi government’s necessity to now rely largely on Shia militias loyal to Iran. Posen writes that if Shia militias now must bear the brunt of the fighting against ISIS, “any victories they might enjoy will be immensely destructive to the local infrastructure, and will be followed by the most brutal repression of the local Sunni Arab population — not the victory for Iraqi civil society U.S. leaders seek, but rather a guarantee of new waves of recruits for jihad” (Posen 2015). Aside

from these two major developments, this was also the point where many Americans and people around the world alike first became aware of ISIS.

### **Playing the Blame Game**

From an American political and geopolitical perspective, the rise of ISIS in 2014 opened a debate about who was to blame for the disintegration of Syria and Iraq. Democrats and those who opposed the invasion of Iraq back in 2003 blame the Bush administration for leading the country into a doomed war under false pretenses. Republicans on the other hand blame the Obama administration for withdrawing all troops from Iraq in 2011, underestimating the rise of ISIS, and not getting involved in the Syrian civil war before it spiraled out of control. Before and during their advance, ISIS was benefitted by a surge in foreign fighters thanks to their massive propaganda machine, stunning victories in Syria and Iraq, and public executions of American and British hostages. From June 2014 through early 2015, ISIS continued to gain large swaths of land in Iraq and Syria including the Iraqi city of Ramadi and the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra. As a strategy to curb and destroy ISIS, the US, NATO members, and Arab allies formed a coalition air campaign that was meant to stem their advance and back up friendly forces on the ground in Iraq and soon after, Syria. While ISIS has not gained any new territory during this time and has even lost territory and key areas such as Ramadi and Tikrit, it remains dug in throughout nearly every major Sunni area in Iraq and all of central and eastern Syria, including their capital of Raqqa. In October 2015, Russia intervened in the Syrian Civil War on behalf of the Assad regime and has launched daily airstrikes and occasional raids on moderate Syrian rebel strongholds in Damascus and the cities of Aleppo and Homs.

Thanks to support from Iran, Russia, and the militant group Hezbollah, the Assad regime has outlived many western countries assertions that the end was near for the regime. The war has

instead entered into a violent stalemate with ISIS and the government largely avoiding each other and picking off the moderate opposition groups that still operate in numerous neighborhoods and towns in the west of the country. Iraq meanwhile heavily relies on Shia militias that have pledged loyalty to the Iranian Ayatollahs and often brutalize the Sunni populations of conquered territories while ISIS firmly remains in most Sunni areas. The Obama administration and NATO allies has showed no willingness to send any ground forces into active combat in either country and has instead elected to rely on supporting friendly groups from the air.

The next few years inevitably appears to be pivotal for the conflicts and in the fight against ISIS. With so many foreign actors now involved in the abutting conflicts and with ISIS proving they can both inspire and orchestrate attacks in Europe and the United States, the next year may prove to be yet another tipping point for the region. Though unlikely, it may also serve as a possible turning point depending on the strategies and possible breakthroughs all the major actors could achieve. Success can only be reached by having a further understanding as to why ISIS was able to take advantage of the political situations in Iraq and Syria and to identify the failures or the western countries in containing ISIS and ending the conflicts in both countries. With the recent attacks in Paris, the world is now in a new and dangerous age with extremists becoming ever more drawn to attacks on soft targets as opposed to historic landmarks. It further shows how much damage a group of highly determined people can do with limited resources and manpower.

Furthermore, since ISIS's territorial takeovers, which were originally devised in 2013, ISIS has been able to completely overhaul their whole apparatus. Today, ISIS is organized "like a real government, with flow charts for acquiring approvals and special departments in charge of social media, logistics, finances, training, recruitment" (Warrick 2015, pg. 285). None of this

would have been possible without the acquisition of key cities such as Mosul that contained billions of dollars held at banks and advanced weapons abandoned by the Iraqi military. Today, ISIS is absorbing some of the greatest minds in Iraq and Syria thanks to their ability to govern and to pay a much higher salary than any other institution could provide. Additionally, ISIS has proven to be a capable governing body thanks to their support from former members of the Saddam Hussein government. Unless their money runs out or land retaken, ISIS will be able to continue to act as an evolving state.

ISIS has enjoyed a meteoric rise in the past couple of years thanks to strong leadership, but also through a comedy of errors by the international community. Starting with the U.S.'s botched invasion of Iraq that culminated with their 2011 rushed and politically-driven withdrawal, the U.S. has desperately lacked a singularly coherent Middle Eastern strategy and continues to do so even today. Thanks to political and Sunni-Shia tensions, the major Middle Eastern countries have merely played each other off for their own national benefit instead of meaningfully going after the Assad regime or ISIS. Until these nations come to a consensus, their actions will continue to be counterproductive. The next chapter will further identify and describe how ISIS specifically operates and governs areas under their control and the West's responses up to this point in time.

# **Chapter III**

## **Governance: A New Terror Blueprint**

Ever since ISIS began acquiring large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq, many experts wondered how, if at all, would ISIS decide to govern their newly conquered territory and people. Another potential route would have been simply occupying the local populations and extracting resources from them to fight off attacks from security forces and other non state actors vying for supremacy. ISIS could have used the more traditional al-Qaeda blueprint of lying low in urban areas and opportunistically ambush government installations as they go. However, there is now overwhelming evidence that ISIS has decided to do what no other modern terror group has done before, to effectively act as a functioning government while also funding their ever-growing military endeavors. This chapter examines how exactly ISIS governs its new subjects. I will also determine how close ISIS is to governing as effectively as other established states. Through research and first hand accounts, ISIS displays a clear ability to govern, but fails to do so uniformly throughout its territory. In the place of consistency, ISIS uses intimidation tactics and arbitrarily takes what they need from locals when they need it in an eerily similar fashion as organized crime syndicates.

Before delving into the governance structures in Syria and Iraq, it is important to first distinguish ISIS's relation to other offshoot territories that it claims to operate in. These areas include Libya, Sinai, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Algeria. While the idea of supporting offshoot expansions in other countries would seem to be a repeat of the al-Qaeda strategy of gaining a presence throughout the Muslim world, the exact goal of these offshoots differ significantly. According to BYU Professor Quinn Mecham, "[t]he Islamic State's 'wilayat' [Arabic term for administrative territory] strategy differs in significant ways from al-Qaeda's 'franchise' strategy" because "affiliates joined up with al-Qaeda as a result of [the affiliate's] failure" (Mecham 2015). Al-Qaeda used this strategy in part because it "helps al-Qaeda with



mission fulfillment, remaining relevant, providing access to new logistics networks, and building a new group of hardened fighters” (Mecham 2015). This is done all in the name of attacking western targets throughout the world, not to establish a governing state. ISIS on the other hand seeks to continue “building out its caliphate, which is evident in its famous slogan *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding). As a result, it has had a relatively clear agenda and model: fighting locally, instituting limited governance and conducting outreach” (Mecham 2015). Though the idea of toppling local governments in numerous other countries and expanding the caliphate seems unrealistic to many westerners, ISIS has proven it can take advantage of chaotic situations and successfully expel local government forces from key cities and regions and exert total control over all aspects of society.

Because ISIS is notorious for their brutality and dislike of anything and anyone of western descent, information about life under ISIS has been sparse and difficult to confirm. However, journalists, government agencies, and people from within its territory have sometimes been able to export information that sheds a great deal of light about how ISIS governs. ISIS relies on two pillars for its operational and governmental controlling capacities. One does not have to personally live under ISIS to understand that its military might and financial flexibility allows them to govern over a large population that is now estimated at near 8 million. Audrey Cronin believes ISIS’s ability to hold such a large territory stems from it fielding “some 30,000 fighters, holds territory in both Iraq and Syria, maintains extensive military capabilities, controls lines of communication, commands infrastructure, funds itself, and engages in sophisticated military operations” (Cronin 2015). The availability of such high amounts of manpower is coupled with capable and experienced commanders leading fighters into battle with sophisticated battle plans that often supersede that of Iraqi or Syrian military planners. Typically, ISIS is able

to recruit a wide range of individuals from all different backgrounds through both religious and economic incentives.

In addition to their military capability, ISIS could not function without having large amounts of money to fund their military and pay for goods and services typically provided by a state. The importance and uniqueness of a perceived terror group having revenue streams from the territory over which they have control is unprecedented. According to an February 2015 Financial Action Task Force report [hereafter referred to as FATF], “ISIL's operations are distinct from those of most other terrorist organisations...Unlike some AQ [al-Qaeda] associated organisations, most of ISIL’s funding is not currently derived from external donations, but is generated within the territory in Iraq and Syria where it currently operates” (FATF 2015, pg. 10). This would support the argument that ISIS is not simply another terror group seeking to temporarily disrupt the world, but to actually plant and base its existence in a set territory with a citizenry.

In 2015 for instance, the U.S. Congressional Research Service report on ISIS [hereafter referred to as CRS], concluded that ISIS had an approved budget of \$2 billion with a projected \$250 million surplus, all aimed to cover the costs of operations in Syria and Iraq (CRS Report 2015, pg. 13). The report states that “[i]n addition to the cost of military operations, the Islamic State must also provide salaries, maintain and repair infrastructure, and fill other state functions, such as the provision of social services” (CRS Report 2015, pg. 13). Such a budget for a terror group is a milestone in the realm of global terrorism that has never been seen before and it gives ISIS a wide range of abilities to carry out functions that other groups such as al-Qaeda never dreamed of fulfilling.

## **Governing With Chaos**

Even with money and territory, ISIS still had to organize itself effectively to both directly and capably carry out governance typically left with the state. Though there is no such conceptual consistency when answering what exactly the government is responsible for doing, one typically includes managing basic infrastructural sectors such as public safety, electricity, clean water, etc. Though the main elements of what make a state a state have been discussed in previous chapters, people's perception towards the ruling power are often shaped by the group's daily governing effectiveness, something that is done on a micro level. According to a recent *New York Times* investigation, "the group [ISIS] is putting in place the kinds of measures associated with governing: issuing identification cards for residents, promulgating fishing guidelines to preserve stocks, requiring that cars carry tool kits for emergencies" (Arango 2015). Furthermore, there is additional evidence that ISIS is sometimes even able to carry out governance in a competent manner. According to a recent *Washington Post* investigative series "Life in the Islamic State", many of those interviewed "said the Islamic State was actually less corrupt and provided more efficient government services, such as road construction and trash collection, than the previous Syrian and Iraqi governments" (Sullivan 2015, "Spoils"). Their ability to carry out such basic, but specified functions show that ISIS is well organized and has real experience in governing. Answering how exactly ISIS can manage various departments can help explain its overall success and the best way to begin is to examine how ISIS organizes itself in a governing manner.

Organizationally speaking, ISIS has a very clear structure of government that handles its various territories in Syria and Iraq. At the top, Baghdadi is the undisputed leader and holds firm control of the leadership, but the degree of his control remains unknown. This is largely due to

both Baghdadi's recent success in growing the group and because of an important family lineage. As Edwards puts it, "Baghdadi is said to be able to trace his lineage back to the first Caliph, the Muslim prophet Abu Bakr Siddiq, who took over after the death of Prophet Muhammad. This disputable fact is, nevertheless, thought to have given sustenance to the leadership cult that has grown up around him" (Edwards 2015). While it is impossible to definitively confirm how much control he exerts over the daily operation of the group, it is believed that he has an active role in the vast majority of major affairs.

Below Baghdadi are two emirs who oversee Syria and Iraq respectively. These emirs appoint five governors in each country who handle local issues (Edwards 2015). In addition to the emirs, ISIS's leadership has nine councils: Leadership, Sharia, Military, Legal, Security, Intelligence, Financial, Media, and Fighters Assistance Council (Edwards 2015). The majority of these councils are headed by former Ba'athist officials from the Saddam Hussein regime and former Sunni Syrian businessmen and officials, both disenfranchised by their home country's governments. Baghdadi in 2014 understood the necessity to recruit highly skilled and educated people and called for "scientists, scholars, preachers, judges, doctors, engineers and people with administrative expertise of all domains" to move to the Islamic State" (CRS 2015, pg. 13). While the sizes and scope likely vary, the fact that such councils exist shows the sheer organization of the group, a frightening leap from the days of being a mere militant insurgency.

### **Oil: Lifeblood of the Caliphate**

As mentioned earlier, being able to budget \$2 billion while reporting a surplus is a major leap in complexity for a perceived terror group and cannot be done without educated officials successfully extracting currency from the local population. However, with such a large territory, ISIS can also extract resources such as oil from the ground on an industrial scale. The economies

of Iraq and Syria leaned heavily on oil exports before the wars. As of 2011, Syria produced approximately 400,000 barrels per day and accounted for 25% of Syrian government revenues and 45% of total Syrian exports (CRS 2015, pg. 4). Today, the Syrian regime only produces 20,000 barrels per day, only 5% of their prewar output (CRS 2015, pg. 4). According to numerous experts, ISIS controls roughly 60% of Syrian oil fields and seven in Iraq (Cronin 2015). The low number in Iraq can be attributed to the fact that the vast majority of Iraqi oil reserves are located in the southern areas of the country and not in the northwestern areas where ISIS operates.

Overall, ISIS has thus far generated a daily profit of \$1.5 million from selling oil on the black market (Solomon, Chazan, and Jones 2015). A 2015 Associated Press story uncovered a “report by the Islamic State's Diwan al-Rakaaez — its version of a Finance Ministry — seen by the AP in Baghdad shows that revenues from oil sales from Syria alone last April totaled \$46.7 million” (Hendawi & Abdul-Zahra 2015). In addition to revenue, the ISIS Finance Ministry report “put at 253 the number of oil wells under IS control in Syria, saying 161 of them were operational. Running the wells were 275 engineers and 1,107 workers, it said” (Hendawi and Abdul-Zahra 2015). This shows the sheer amount of manpower and resources needed to successfully extract and refine oil. Though all these facts indicate ISIS can produce oil en masse for a lucrative profit, a few logistical issues have greatly hampered the group from using oil to its full potential, and must instead rely on the black market and alliances with various underground organized crime rings to maximize profits.

The process of extracting oil from the ground and refining it to be used as fuel is tedious, expensive, and requires a certain set of expertise that is hard to come by. Because of this, ISIS is more limited in what they can use much of their oil for. Without refining oil, it cannot be used as

fuel for trucks and other military installations that require gasoline. According to the CRS, “[w]hile IS forces are not in control of a modern operating oil refinery, the group has refined oil in crude, small, mobile refineries with capacities of about 300 to 500 barrels per day of petroleum products” (CRS 2015, pg. 5). In its place, ISIS is said to trade crude oil for smaller amounts of refined oil with various third party actors (FATF 2015, pg. 14). Without going too far into the process of refining oil, the basic requirements would appear to be having workers with experience in refining oil and the tools to do so, both of which ISIS appears to be lacking on an industrial scale.

Another major hurdle in exporting oil is simply the fact that ISIS is barred from being apart of the global oil trade and thus struggles to efficiently get its oil to the market. The CRS report sums up the issue by saying, “[b]ecause the Syrian government considers IS oil to be stolen contraband and because international sanctions limit the markets the oil can legally enter, IS oil trades at a steeply discounted price” (CRS 2015, pg. 5). Aside from the discounted price, which is no small negative, selling oil on the black market has its positives. For instance, in war-torn Syria and Iraq, many people are unable to find available “legal” oil and other commodities for purchase and when they do, the prices are often higher than global averages due to the uncertain supply in the area. Thus, many communities, rebel groups, and even the Syrian regime have been reported to knowingly purchase oil from ISIS thanks to its availability and low price (FATF 2015, pg.14).

While impossible to verify without any sort of receipt, reports have emerged estimating ISIS’s going rates for selling oil. The FATF estimates that ISIS sells its oil at a price between \$20-\$35 USD per barrel while the CRS reports ISIS sometimes sells at an even lower price of \$18 (FATF 2015, pg. 14 & CRS 2015, pg. 5). However, with the global price of oil plummeting,

ISIS likely has had to dramatically discount their black market prices. The CRS notes that the group's \$20-\$35 price was sold when Brent, a world price reference for crude oil was selling for about \$107 per barrel. Out of this, "[t]he fall in world oil prices has likely further reduced the net price received by IS leaders for the oil they sell" (CRS 2015, pg. 5), a price already drastically low due to the various extra expenses incurred in getting their oil onto the black market.

Even on the export black market, ISIS members are unable to operate without including outside forces such as smuggling networks to move oil outside their territory. The FATF report points out that "Syria in particular has a long history of smuggling networks operating in the country and along the border regions" (FATF 2015, pg. 14). These groups consist of largely autonomous, and sometimes powerful local families known to have dealings in arms and drug smuggling and historical ties to the Syrian regime (FATF 2015, pg. 14). Such groups are primarily used because their smuggling routes date back decades and are incredibly adept to alluding detecting from locals and the U.S.-led campaign seeking to destroy ISIS. Most importantly, these networks are profit motivated and thrive in areas with weak or no governance so they primarily want to see the status quo of relative anarchy continue in the region. Thus, since Syria and Iraq are largely devoid of central order, these groups have been able to expand their operations throughout Iraq, Syria and even neighboring countries. If ISIS had stronger state institutions and economic programs helping with development, they may not need to rely so heavily on other organized crime groups to maintain their tepid governing monopoly.

After selling oil at a price of roughly \$20 per barrel, these criminal networks went on to sell that same oil for anywhere between \$60-\$100 per barrel in areas far from ISIS's control, most notably Turkey (FATF 2015, pg. 14). Many experts point to the porous Turkish border as the chief area where ISIS oil changes hands to its final buyer, who often resides within Turkey as

well. Members of the Russian government have even gone so far as accusing Turkish President Recep Erdogan of personally being involved in oil trade with ISIS (John 2015). While there is no evidence linking Erdogan or any members of the government with ISIS's oil trade at this time, many experts agree that Turkey has done little to nothing in combating trade and ISIS movement along its border.

This is because, as Fawaz Gerges, Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science puts it, "The reason people accuse Turkey of collaborating with ISIS is because...their priority is to topple Assad...Their unofficial open border policy allowed radical Islamists...to bring money, resources and fighters into [and from] Syria" (John 2015). While deviating from oil, this shows how varying agendas have impacted the international response to combat ISIS. Furthermore, the complexity of the black market oil trade in the Middle East is further proof of how difficult it is to shut off ISIS's access to regional and local oil buyers. This is often easier said than done due to the discrete nature of the industry. For instance, the AP reported, through speaking with anonymous Iraqi intelligence officials that "[t]hose buying the oil often wire the payments to female IS members in Istanbul and Ankara — on the presumption that women will draw less attention — and the money is later hand-carried into Iraq or Syria" (Hendawi and Abdul-Zahra 2015). Until such avenues of commerce are made unavailable to ISIS members, the international community will not be able to shut down ISIS's oil revenues. While lucrative, ISIS generates millions of dollars through other means that continue to resemble a cross between a central government and organized crime mafia.

### **Tax as Extortion**

In addition to oil, ISIS generates income not only through taxes, but also through extortion and asset seizures. The CRS report cites the FATF as noting, "while ISIL frames its



activities as ‘taxation’ or ‘charitable giving,’ it in fact runs a sophisticated protection racket where involuntary ‘donations’ purchase momentary safety or temporary continuity of business” (CRS 2015, pg. 9). This would indicate that people are essentially forced to pay ISIS to protect the status quo of their business and overall safety from other actors, most likely Iranian backed Shia militias.

Sullivan cites interviews with locals who say, “they used to pay between 2.5 percent and 10 percent of their income in zakat, a charitable contribution that Muslims make to support the poor. But they said the Islamic State now demands that zakat payments be made to it instead” (Sullivan 2015, “Economy”). Using zakat to fund military campaigns is not in line with the teachings of Islam so it is clearly understandable how outraged locals would be with such a request. Such an action would even undermine ISIS’s basic premise of creating a pure Islamic State if its governing bodies do not even adhere to the most basic Islamic morals. In addition to religious taxes, ISIS also collects business taxes, border customs, and utility taxes from the local population (CRS 2015, pg. 9-10). In yet another example of its organization, ISIS attempts to regulate businesses by determining prices in various instances. In terms of banks, ISIS has two different approaches depending on whether it’s a state-owned or private bank. For state-owned banks, ISIS has typically looted each branch, while “choosing instead to levy a tax of 5% on all customer cash withdrawals” from private banks (CRS 2015, pg. 9). According to one unnamed businessman living under ISIS, “They observe prices; if anyone raises prices too much, they are punished” (Sullivan 2015, “Economy”). While there is no clear universal regulation, price managing shows just how detailed oriented and experienced in governing some ISIS officials truly are.

## **ISIS's Appeal: Financial over Religion**

What is even more striking is according to numerous reports, “[s]everal people interviewed said the previous Syrian and Iraqi governments were notorious for demanding bribes, while the Islamic State seems to have strict rules against its officials taking payoffs” (Sullivan 2015, “Economy”). Others have “grudgingly acknowledged that some of the engineers, architects and other skilled professionals who the militants have recruited from around the world have improved services” in comparison to former Iraqi and Syrian government installations (Sullivan 2015, “Economy”). This would not only show that ISIS is more than capable to govern, but the fact that they can even provide better services than legitimate governments show just how weak and corrupt the Iraqi and Syrian states are. In fact, in the eyes of those who receive better services, ISIS would be a far better alternative to Syrian, Iraqi, Kurdish, or Shia militant governing alternatives, which Sunnis believe would commit mass atrocities against them as retribution. Though inconceivable to the western world, the fact that ISIS has made life relatively better in the short term for some should show that simply defeating them militarily would not solve the deeper issues that simply require better governance.

Arguably the greatest appeal ISIS can make for locals to join in their cause is strictly financial and security based. In addition to Baghdadi's appeal in 2014, the ISIS financial ministry announced “it was seeking candidates with PhDs in Islamic law and economics, as well as those with high school diplomas,” and soon after hundreds of engineers, lawyers and other civil servants joined its ranks (CRS 2015, pg. 13). However, it is important to examine the specific reasons for the influx of skilled labor. These people do not necessarily believe in the violent and oppressive ideology preached by ISIS, but instead seek financial and personal security. Typically, highly skilled members come from Iraq, Syria, and various other neighboring

countries with a few exceptions from Europe. These skilled laborers tend to be different than the typical foreigner traveling to join the fight in the sense that locals join for more financial incentives, not ideological. To illustrate the drastic choice of joining ISIS, the CRS found:

At the beginning of the uprising in 2011, the monthly minimum wage for public sector employees in Syria ranged between 9,765 and 14,760 Syrian pounds (\$176-\$266). By 2013, the steep drop in the value of the Syrian pound reduced public sector wages by about 60% to an equivalent of \$68-\$103. By contrast, the Islamic State is estimated to pay approximately \$400-\$600 monthly to each fighter, with married fighters receiving an extra stipend per wife and child (CRS 2015, pg. 13).

In a region with little economic opportunity and uncertain security, a 60 percent wage hike and relative guarantee of safety would make many consider joining ISIS, just as so many have done. In terms of the oil industry, “Hashem al-Hashemi, a prominent Iraqi expert on the Islamic State, said Iraqi oil engineers are given a daily rate of \$300, rising to nearly \$1,000 when they deal with technical problems” (Hendawi and Abdul-Zahra 2015). Such high wages would indicate many working for ISIS would bring their expertise elsewhere if given a viable alternative, which does not currently exist. In one of the many interview documented by Sullivan, Yassin al-Jassem, who fled his home near Raqqa says, “There is no work, so you have to join them in order to live... So many local people have joined them. They were pushed into Daesh [ISIS] by hunger” (Sullivan 2015, “Spoils”). Jassem went on to describe the story of how when his 2 year old grandson developed a brain tumor, doctors demanded \$800, a sum he did not have. Sullivan describes the situation further and says, “[h]e [Jassem] was desperate, so in late May he went to the militants to beg for his grandson’s life, and they offered him a choice. “They said to me, ‘If you give us your son to fight with us, we will pay for your grandson’s treatment,’ ” he said” (Sullivan 2015, “Spoils”). These people who make such a choice should not be begrudged because it is human nature to do what is best for themselves and their family. Those angry should direct their fury to those responsible for such a violent and anarchic reality.

While ISIS fighters may not specifically take personal payoffs, their operation of acquiring wealth from the local population is not exactly in line with that of other sovereign nations. The FATF summarizes this assertion by saying, “ISIL manages a sophisticated extortion racket by robbing, looting, and demanding a portion of the economic resources in areas where it operates, which is similar to how some organized crime groups generate funds” (FATF 2015, pg.12). Though ISIS appears to successfully carry out many functions typical of a government, they appear to arbitrarily demand payments from locals with no precedent or legitimate procedure.

### **Intimidation and Anarchy as Law**

Additionally, a wealth of evidence suggests that ISIS does not fulfill basic governance functions on a universal level. While people in Mosul or Fallujah may notice competent governance, people in other areas under the control of ISIS paint a drastically different picture. As Sullivan puts it, ISIS has “made the damage worse, in ways that could be felt for decades to come — reversing gains in public education, ruining the medical infrastructure, establishing a justice system based on terror, and exposing a generation of children to gruesome and psychologically devastating violence” (Sullivan 2015, “Spoils”). Though ISIS protects people from outside forces and brings stability in that regard, people must still live their lives at the mercy of arbitrary rule. For instance, people suspected of colluding against ISIS are promptly beheaded or crucified in local towns with no due process of any sort.

In the realm of judiciary process, one can find very little in ISIS controlled areas. According to numerous unverified reports, many of the police and judges are originally from outside nations such as Tunisia, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Russia, France, and Britain. These people overlook a “justice system [that] was capricious and abusive. He [unmanned local] said three of

his neighbors were killed because their enemies lied about them to Daesh” (Sullivan 2015, “Justice”). From these sources, one can begin to see life under ISIS as one filled with paranoia and uncertainty. Nobody can speak negatively about ISIS to anyone outside immediate family over fear of death while laws are not always followed to the fullest extent depending on somebody’s location in the territory.

Education is yet another institution heavily controlled by ISIS. To further its radical agenda, ISIS oversees the curriculum of every school allowed to operate in its territory and closed all schools to reinstate teachers willing to peddle ISIS’s ideology. This harkens memories back to Nazi Germany’s Hitler Youth Schools and such assertions are not inaccurate. In addition, schools have been barred from teaching music, art, and geography. According to one Syrian teacher, after ISIS arrived, “a large, bearded fighter from Saudi Arabia told him that if he wanted to teach, he could conduct religious education classes at the mosque, for boys only, under Islamic State supervision” (Sullivan 2015, “Education”). Recent interviews conducted through *The Washington Post* suggests that many parents have taken their children out of school altogether while foreign fighters receive preferential treatment when sending their children through the ISIS-run schools (Sullivan 2015, “Education”). To fully calculate the damage being done to education, one must look at the bigger picture in the country. A report released in March 2015, by the NGO Save the Children concluded that public education enrollment in Syria had decreased to 50 percent from nearly 100 percent before the civil war started in 2011, erasing decades of progress in secular education.

The situation for women is even more perilous. According to numerous women interviewed, “militants would use any pretext to detain women: “They use the women prisoners for wives for the foreign fighters. If you go to prison, you are given away to God- only-knows

who”” (Sullivan 2015, “Women”). Women have to adhere to a separate handbook called “Woman of the Islamic State”, which was recently created by a female ISIS group. The manifesto, translated into English by Charlie Winter, senior researcher at the London-based Quilliam Foundation, “says that women should leave their homes only in specific circumstances, including going to study religion or to work in situations where women are strictly segregated” (Sullivan 2015, “Women”). Even when women adhere to these customs, they run the risk of getting captured off the street and sold to ISIS fighters, yet another example of the anarchic nature of governance under ISIS.

To make matters worse, ISIS is chiefly involved in human trafficking rings that often sell off minority women into slavery or forced marriages. Slavery specifically has become so popular among its fighters that the group has provided guidance to them regarding how many female slaves each fighter is allowed to own. One minority group most targeted by ISIS has been the Yazidis, a historically vilified and persecuted minority group of Iraq that worships both the Bible and Koran, a practice seen as blasphemous in the eyes of many fundamentals (BBC News Magazine 2014). According to the FATF, the price fighters pay for their slaves appear to be roughly \$13 USD, while one Yazidi woman was freed at a cost of \$3,000 (FATF 2015, pg. 13). The FATF surmises, “[g]iven the small amounts cited, it is difficult to envisage human trafficking as a lucrative source of revenue for ISIL, but it may be more important as a means of meeting the demands of its fighters” (FATF 2015, pg. 13). When male fighters travel to join ISIS, many expect a utopian of riches, which includes numerous wives and slaves. All these reports citing human rights atrocities, uneven governance, and organized crime ties show just how far away ISIS is from being a legitimate governing body.

## **Key to Longevity: Moderation?**

This begs the question, no matter how unlikely, of how ISIS could possibly survive long-term in the international world order. Some even go so far as to say ISIS is just the latest in a long line of extremist movements seeking to overthrow the existing world order. Political theorist Stephen M. Walt echoes this sentiment and claims ISIS's revolutionary aspirations are similar to those that emerged during the French, Russian, Chinese, and Iranian revolutions. Walt says, "[t]hese movements were as hostile to prevailing international norms as ISIS is, and they also used ruthless violence to eliminate or intimidate rivals and demonstrate their power to a wider world" (Walt 2015). Though Walt acknowledges many of those examples lack ISIS's religious dimensions, the basic point remains that those revolutions each in their own way, challenged deeply held political norms and seriously endangered longstanding political institutions in surrounding states.

Furthermore, Walt argues that such revolutions "purvey ideologies designed to justify extreme methods and convince their followers that their sacrifices will bear fruit" (Walt 2015). All revolutionary causes seek to right perceived injustices on their respective societies and endorse extreme methods (ISIS beheadings, French guillotine, etc.) to achieve their objectives. Whether it was Russians fighting to free the proletariat, French revolutionaries overthrowing the monarchy, or Iranians toppling an American-backed regime, all had one central, radical objective to right these perceived injustices. Walt then points out that ISIS is really no different in this regard by saying, "[i]ts leaders and ideologues portray the West as innately hostile and existing Arab and Muslim governments as heretical entities contrary to Islam's true nature" (Walt 2015). Thus, with the help of God, believers say ISIS will inevitably prevail. This belief that one's

revolution is destined to succeed is a similarly held belief among many historic revolutions as well. Walt points this out and says,

French radicals in the 1790s called for a “crusade for universal liberty,” and Marxist-Leninists believed that world revolution would produce a classless, stateless commonwealth of peace. Similarly, Khomeini and his followers saw the revolution in Iran as the first step toward the abolition of the “un-Islamic” nation-state system and the establishment of a global Islamic community (Walt 2015).

While ISIS will never establish a global Islamic state, the fact of the matter is that such a prophetic view of thinking has had a historical track record of being a successful rallying cry in revolutions. Thus, such fodder should not be totally discounted as pure crazy talk since such inflammatory rhetoric has succeeded in past instances. However, Walt points out that ideals in prior revolutions such as France’s freedom for all or Russia’s classless utopia could appeal to a broader political audience than ISIS can ever. He says, “[b]y contrast, ISIS' puritanical message and violent methods do not travel well, and its blueprint for an ever-expanding caliphate clashes with powerful national, sectarian, and tribal identities throughout the Middle East” (Walt 2015). However, ISIS has proven that it can still garner enough support to spread beyond borders even with its very narrow public appeal.

Even after a successful uprising, Walt points out that “[t]o be accepted into the community of nations, however, radical or revolutionary movements eventually have to abandon some (if not all) of their most ferocious practices” and cites Kenneth Waltz’s hypothesis that all radical states become “socialized into the system” (Walt June 2015 FP). Not doing so would threaten the fragile gains already made in the revolution. For instance, the Soviet Union had to scale back actively subverting neighboring democracies once Hitler became an existential threat to all European countries. France on the other hand spiraled out of control and resulted in Napoleon laying destruction to all of Europe. In a more modern example, while many rightfully question the sincerity of Iranian regime’s negotiations with the west, the fact remains that Iran is



a UN member and in theory recognizes international law and territorial sovereignty of other states [Israel possibly notwithstanding].

Arguably the most interesting modern state born out of a violent revolution based on ancient religious fervor is Saudi Arabia. In a *New York Times* opinion piece, Kamel Daoud writes that Saudi Arabia “relies on an alliance with a religious clergy that produces, legitimizes, spreads, preaches and defends Wahhabism, the ultra-puritanical form of Islam that Daesh feeds on” (Daoud 2015). Born out of an alliance between the House of Saud and Wahhabis, a religious sect that preaches a strict interpretation of Islam, Saudi Arabia is essentially an Islamic state that has successfully become a member of the established world order. This was accomplished even though Saudi Arabia institutes similar customs as ISIS. For instance, the state severely bans woman’s rights and still prescribes to medieval law practices such as cutting off hands for theft and even beheadings for more serious crimes. While the Saudi ruling family is no supporters of ISIS, the country has a long history of producing jihadists, most notably Osama bin Laden.

Some would argue that a radical state such as Saudi Arabia, which was formed in the early 1900s, could never legitimately be accepted and integrated into the world community today. While Walt acknowledges that the norms of acceptable state building has changed, he surmises that “this long history does remind us that movements that were once beyond the pale sometimes end up accepted and legitimized, if they manage to hang onto power long enough” (Walt 2015 FP). For instance, the Maoist revolution and subsequent civil war in 1949 ultimately killed millions of civilians and contained some of the worst atrocities ever seen. This occurred in a world that had recently witnessed some of humanity’s gravest crimes in the Holocaust and promised to never let such atrocities happen again.

John E. McLaughlin, a former deputy director of the CIA makes the point that “[a]t the time, these movements were regarded as completely beyond the pale and a threat to international order” (Arango 2015). McLaughlin additionally points to the more modern example of Hezbollah, considered a terror group by much of the world, becoming a legitimate political player in the Middle East. These examples of revolutions moderating into acceptable global actors are obviously imperfect examples when comparing them with ISIS, but are merely meant to show that even the most frowned upon revolutions in history do not always simply disintegrate, as so many expect of ISIS. Instead, such examples should make policymakers even more alarmed about the rise of ISIS. They should not expect good to automatically defeat evil without actually having to do anything about it. While ISIS is likely to decay and disintegrate in the long run, it would be naïve to completely rule out ISIS successfully moderating in order to sustain itself in the future if it is able to maintain the territorial sovereignty it currently enjoys.

Through its governance, ISIS has proven it can be capable and in some instances, an improvement over the capabilities of Syrian and Iraqi governments. ISIS’s structure of having various departments for local governance is a leap in complexion over anything al-Qaeda has ever attempted. However, a closer examination exposes its arbitrary and anarchic nature that forces its citizens to live in constant fear. Based on interviews and first-hand accounts, ISIS treats its people more along the lines of an organized crime group extorting locals with the goal of squeezing them financially to fund military enterprises. In the big picture, this shows that ISIS cannot be considered an effective governing body compared with our basic expectations on what a state ought to provide its people. With that said, while people living under their rule certainly would rather not have to coexist with ISIS, the broader realities in the Middle East give them few alternatives.

**Chapter IV**  
**Media and Recruits: The Keys to**  
**Success**

Over the past few years, ISIS has shown it can utilize and even weaponize the Internet to a degree no group has ever been able to. Today, the Internet is accessible to billions of people around the world and gives people a platform to say what they want, allowing them to connect with other people around the world with little repercussions. Now, groups such as ISIS have realized that the Internet opens the door to endless possibilities. ISIS has become so tech savvy that they have various social media platforms spewing its ideology, nearly undetectable chat rooms that allow members to coordinate plans with one another, and sites that give instructions for bomb making and how to best travel to the caliphate. Without the Internet, ISIS would not be where it is today in terms of membership and long-distance relationships necessary to coordinate general plans, recruitments, and attacks. So far, the international response to limiting ISIS's access to the web has proven completely ineffective. This chapter will assess how ISIS has been able to exploit the Internet for its benefit while also examining the people most susceptible to answering ISIS's call to travel and fight on their behalf. Specifically, I will argue that while impressive, ISIS's media blitz has been greatly enhanced by their territorial successes in the Middle East and subsequent global terror attacks. I will also argue that ISIS has successfully mastered the process of recruitment, which is both very personal and culture based.

### **The Worldwide Web**

Before specifically getting into what platforms ISIS exploits for its benefit, it may be helpful to first revisit the Internet's proliferation over the past twenty years. One must ultimately remember that in the grand scale of things, the Internet is extremely young, only becoming accessible to much of the world over the past decade. Few could have imagined how large a role the Internet would play in daily life and conversely, many more could not have possibly foreseen it playing such a large role in world history. In the past few years, we saw it play a role in

stoking political uprisings in countries such as Iran during the failed 2009 Green Revolution. Merely two years later, the world witnessed the Arab Spring, which was largely coordinated online by activists scheduling rallies and transmitting atrocities caused by incumbent governments desperately seeking to hold onto power. Now, for example, instead of reading in a newspaper about a bloody government crackdown in Cairo from two weeks ago, the world can now readily watch a homemade video instantly in all its authenticity about what really transpired. Unfortunately, as we have seen, the Internet can also open the gates to extremely malicious actors being only a click away from millions, if not billions of people.

Understanding this relatively new global dynamic, ISIS has created a propaganda machine that is not only able to reach a large amount of people, but can thwart continual detection. The basic goal of ISIS's media outreach is simple: to convert people into both active and passive supporters, meaning that people can travel to Syria to help the caliphate or remain in their home country and help the cause through other means. Much of their success can be attributed from their high level of technological understanding. In addition to having competent leadership in their media department, ISIS has utilized all the relatively new forms of social media that has been created over the past decade such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Soundcloud to name a few. With these new forms of communication, "[t]he group has relied extensively on the Internet to market its poisonous ideology and recruit would-be terrorists" (Cohen 2015). The sheer volume of online forums now in use gives ISIS additional leeway in customizing its propaganda and targeting various groups of individuals.

### **Recruiting Through Culture**

For instance, according to a 2015 Brookings report, J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan estimated that as of late 2014, 46,000 Twitter accounts openly supported ISIS (Berger and

Morgan 2015). In terms of Twitter, these various individuals from around the world can tweet with hash tags that could then allow them to find other users with similar feelings. According to Cohen, “to make each new account appear more influential than it really is, they purchase fake followers from social media marketing firms; just \$10 can boost one’s follower count by tens of thousands” (Cohen 2015). These people could then exchange tweets that often reinforce ISIS’s ideology and later communicate in various online chat rooms that become extremely difficult to track. Official ISIS accounts differ in the sense that they usually post official videos and writings by group members as opposed to on individual members’ profile. These group accounts do not actively communicate with potential recruits. Recruiters would reach out to recruits through their personal accounts to attempt to get to know these possible recruits. These recruiters also attempt to reshape the group’s general message based on the individual’s personal circumstances.

Catering ISIS’s overall message on an individual and personal basis is one of the most important aspects of its online recruitment strategy. For instance, a recruiter would not use the same talking points with a Middle Eastern Muslim if he were talking with an American Catholic high school girl. A 2014 video cited by *The New York Times* backs up this claim:

In another English-language video pitch, a British fighter identified as Brother Abu Bara al-Hindi poses the call to jihad as a test for comfortable Westerners. “Are you willing to sacrifice the fat job you’ve got, the big car, the family?” he asks. Despite such luxuries, he says, “Living in the West, I know how you feel — in the heart you feel depressed.” The Prophet Muhammad, he declares, said, “The cure for depression is jihad.” (Shane and Hubbard 2014)

The use of foreigners to connect with other foreigners is employed simply because they understand how tough and radical the decision to join ISIS really is. Having an English speaking fighter talk with other potential fighters from English speaking countries makes the cultural barrier appear significantly less daunting since they both come from similar cultural backgrounds. Shane and Hubbard additionally point out that “the message to English speakers is

nonetheless far softer than the Arabic-language videos...Instead of emphasizing jihad as a means of personal fulfillment, and the Arabic media production portrays it as duty for all Muslims” (Shane and Hubbard 2014). Much of this sentiment stems from the fact that those who live in the Middle East are more accustomed and closer to violence and hardship compared to those who live in the western world. Thus, unlike the videos created to the Western audience, the ones that use Arabic “flaunts violence toward its foes, especially Shiites and the Iraqi and Syrian security services, while portraying the killing as just vengeance” (Shane and Hubbard 2014). By understanding that these cultural barriers exist and with their ability to customize their pitch to fit various cultural conditions, ISIS can effectively communicate with people from virtually any background.

### **ISIS News Media**

Aside from recruitment, ISIS uses the Internet to spread news and information relevant to its supporters. This includes everything from bomb making manuals to execution and prayer videos. Furthermore, there is evidence that the group meticulously plans such video shoots and pools a relatively large amount of resources and manpower into their production. Much of the group’s core experience in terms of terror propaganda can be attributed to “veterans of al-Qaeda media teams, young recruits fluent in social media platforms, and a bureaucratic discipline reminiscent of totalitarian regimes” (Miller & Mekhennet 2015). In a series of interviews with *The Washington Post*, former ISIS member Abu Abdullah al-Maghribi described the group’s media arm as “a whole army of media personnel...The media people are more important than the soldiers,” he said. “Their monthly income is higher. They have better cars. They have the power to encourage those inside to fight and the power to bring more recruits to the Islamic State” (Miller & Mekhennet 2015). One media member even claimed to have received a Toyota SUV, a

villa with a garden, stipends for food, and a \$700 monthly salary, an amount far more than the average fighter earns (Miller & Mekhennet 2015). These accounts indicate just how important ISIS believes its media production to be in its general fight for global notoriety. Reports from other former ISIS members back up al-Maghribi's assessment while others shed light on the group's strenuous training for such media positions.

Abu Hajer, another former media cameraman for ISIS seconded al-Maghribi's assertions. According to Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet, who interviewed Hajer from a Moroccan prison, "shortly after entering Syria [Hajer] he was groomed to be part of the Islamic State's media team. He spent two months undergoing basic military training before he was admitted to a special, month-long program" that "specializes in how to do filming. How to mix footage. How to get the right voice and tone" (Miller and Mekhennet 2015). In an environment with very scarce resources such as the ISIS caliphate, these lavish bonuses only strengthen the notion that the group believes its media machine is to a large extent responsible for mobilizing its foreign fighters to become active members. The fact that ISIS has had considerable military and territorial success is notable and should not be discounted. However, the group's success in easily exporting its propaganda in a professional manner is yet another indication of their growing complexion.

With this enhanced focus on production, ISIS has been able to produce extraordinarily professional videos. According to Miller and Mekhennet, "[d]iscrepancies among frames showed that scenes had been rehearsed and shot in multiple takes over many hours. The releases showed professional-caliber attention to lighting, sound and camera positioning" (Miller & Mekhennet 2015). This is yet another indication showing the sensitivity and care taken in producing such videos. The more troubling aspect of these reports is that it shows ISIS clearly possesses the



capabilities to attract bright individuals with critical experience in media production. This would also indicate that even with its brutal footage, the group's media strategy is generating support.

For instance, on one of Abu Hajar's assignments, the job "took him to an elaborately staged scene of carnage, a mass execution-style killing [of Syrian regime soldiers] choreographed for cameras in a way that has become an Islamic State signature" (Miller & Mekhennet 2015). This would dent the belief that such executions are filmed live and organically. Instead, we begin to see a pattern of deliberately produced high quality execution videos that are done over the course of hours and planned weeks ahead of time. Miller and Mekhennet lay out the process through speaking with al-Maghribi:

Abu Abdullah [al-Maghribi] said he had witnessed a public execution-style killing in the city of Bab in which a propaganda team presided over almost every detail. They brought a white board scrawled with Arabic script to serve as an off-camera cue card for the public official charged with reciting the condemned man's alleged crimes. The hooded executioner raised and lowered his sword repeatedly so that crews could catch the blade from multiple angles. The beheading took place only when the camera crew's director said it was time to proceed. The execution wasn't run by the executioner, Abu Abdullah said. "It's the media guy who says when they are ready" (Miller & Mekhennet 2015).

Though such gruesome depictions seem counterintuitive to promoting a good life in their self-proclaimed Islamic State, the genius of their production can be found in the diverse productions in which ISIS undertakes. As Miller and Mekhennet write, "[i]ts releases cluster around seemingly incompatible themes: sometimes depicting the caliphate as a peaceful and idyllic domain, other times as a society awash in apocalyptic violence" (Miller & Mekhennet 2015). The reasoning behind this stems from the fact that ISIS targets a diverse range of people from around the world who have different cultures and tastes. Just as media conglomerates in the west pride themselves on having diverse programming platforms to reach an audience, ISIS diversifies its production to reach as many and as different people as possible. ISIS's propaganda devotes a "remarkable amount of its energy...to creating an alternative, idealized version of itself

online and shaping how that virtual empire is perceived” (Miller & Mekhennet 2015). Their process and ability to uniquely repackage their brand in new ways in the future should not be overlooked.

### **The Art of Staying Relevant**

Many struggle to understand how ISIS has been able to differentiate itself from other groups such as al-Qaeda in terms of media effectiveness. The answer, however, is very simple. “The overriding point is that success breeds success,” said Emile Nakhleh, a former C.I.A. analyst. “The perception of quick victories and territory and weapons and bases means they don’t need to try hard to recruit” (Shane and Hubbard 2014). In a sense, ISIS’s success pitches itself through the media reporting on everything from its territorial gains to gruesome executions. One usually cannot go a full day without coming across either a TV or Internet story documenting ISIS’s latest international outrage. Nakhleh seconds this assessment and goes on to say, “[y]oung people look at ISIS and say, ‘By gosh, they’re doing it!’ They see the videos with fighters riding on big tanks. They see that ISIS has money,” (Shane and Hubbard 2014). In a modern world that demands instant gratification, ISIS is by far and away the jihadist group that personifies the importance of having tangible success.

In this environment with a need for continued results and media attention, ISIS has proven to have remarkable staying power. Just from the standpoint of mainstream news organizations, ISIS has essentially produced enough relevant and “new” news to remain the top global story since 2014. In our fast paced news cycle and general public discourse defined by having short attention spans for stories, this is nothing short of remarkable. ISIS has been able to stay so relevant in part due to its ability to diversify itself. In 2014, ISIS was defined as the group that took Syria by storm, slaughtered minorities, and reversed the past seven years of American-

induced stability (or attempted stability) after sectarian conflict hit its peak in 2006. Media giants even began referring to ISIS as the “ISIS army” to drum up news coverage. Shortly after, ISIS orchestrated a long list of high profile execution videos of westerners that culminated in the U.S. organizing an air coalition to “contain and destroy” ISIS. Once the narrative remained relatively constant into 2015, ISIS set out and systematically destroyed numerous historical landmarks such as Shia mosques and the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra in May 2015.

Finally, this past fall, ISIS terror went global. Since October, ISIS operatives and supporters have carried out attacks in Egypt (on a Russian airliner), Tunisia, Turkey, Lebanon, France, United States, and Indonesia. While there are no definitive links pointing to coordination between the attackers in San Bernadino with operatives in Syria, the online pledge of allegiance to ISIS taken by the female accomplice was a strong enough connection for many. In every one of these instances, the narrative of ISIS changes, which in turn keeps the media spotlight on them. This is yet another important contrast with al-Qaeda, which has become increasingly one dimensional in terms of its capabilities. With such a notable and diversified track record, ISIS has stayed in the news and through its actions, provides enough diverse material for its media team to reach out to people around the world. In short, ISIS’s social media success is directly linked to its successful operations around the world and may even be the primary driving force behind it. However, ISIS could not parlay real life success with Internet success without having the necessary tech-savvy staff at its disposal. In this sense, the war against ISIS’s propaganda machine must be fought both on the Internet and the battlefields of Syria and Iraq.

### **Foreign Fighters**

As a direct result of ISIS’s unprecedented ability to utilize the Internet for propaganda purposes, the group has successfully rallied thousands of foreigners to join the jihad. According

to The Soufan Group (hereafter referred to as TSG), a private organization that provides strategic security intelligence services to governments and multinational organizations, “between 27,000 and 31,000 people have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State and other violent extremist groups from at least 86 countries” (TSG 2015, pg. 4). While it is impossible to determine how many foreign fighters have traveled to Syria and Iraq simply based off of Internet communications with recruiters, one can begin to find some patterns in terms of who and how ISIS recruits so many fighters.

There are five types of people who join ISIS: Iraqis and Syrians who join out of necessity (protection, economic relief), Sunnis wanting to overthrow the Assad regime and all Iranian/Shia aligned factions, radical Islamic fundamentalists enamored with the concept of creating a caliphate, young people disenfranchised in their home country, and anarchists who simply admire ISIS’s barbaric persona. While religion plays a prominent role for sure, it is not the primary motivating factor in the majority of cases, but is used by the group to help reinforce the idea of having a new beginning. It is also important to differentiate between those from Iraq and Syria with people from foreign countries. This is simply due to the fact that Iraqi and Syrian lives are directly impacted by the outcome of the conflict and are thus forced to take a side while foreigners make a personal choice to involve themselves. Because of this, the remainder of this chapter will primarily examine the motivations of non-Iraqi and Syrian citizens.

In terms of specific areas, TSG compiled a list of the top five countries and regions in which foreign fighters originate. While the majority of recruits, approximately 16,000 reside in Arab and North African states, TSG findings show that 5,000 foreign fighters originated in Western Europe and another 4,700 have traveled from former Soviet Republics in Eastern Europe (TSG 2015, pg. 5). On a more macro level, the numerical top five countries by foreign

fighters are Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey, and Jordan (TSG 2015 pg. 5). One common thread to emerge from these statistics indicates that all five of these countries' governments are either seen as direct U.S. allies with the exception of Russia. However, Russia has been directly in ISIS's crosshairs since it's military intervention in Syria and its decades-long military operations in the Muslim-majority Caucasus region of Russia. Knowing where foreign fighters travel from compared to where they do not can be very valuable data in determining what exactly motivates these people to completely pick up their lives and move to join a barbaric group halfway around the world.

Many people cannot even begin to comprehend how ISIS's gruesome messages can resonate with people. Some point to the actions of one's home government as the main reason for foreign recruitment. While this theory may hold up in the case of Russians traveling to fight after Putin entered the conflict, it does not in many others. If foreign intervention was the only determinant, then the United States ought to lead the world in foreign recruits. Instead, TSG research puts the number of total North American ISIS foreign fighters at 280, which is less than the country of Belgium, which is singularly at over 400 (TSG 2015, pg. 4). Instead, a new and more sociological theory has recently emerged out of these statistics:

The majority of its video production appeals to those who seek a new beginning rather than revenge for past acts. A search for belonging, purpose, adventure, and friendship, appear to remain the main reasons for people to join the Islamic State, just as they remain the least addressed issues in the international fight against terrorism (TSG 2015, pg. 6).

When the theatrical brutalities and religious overtures prominently featured in its propaganda are stripped away, ISIS's basic message remains one of creating a utopian society. Thus, its target audience is not merely young Muslims, but instead a much larger demographic. These people either through economic, social, or any personal issue, believe life in their home country is fruitless and see ISIS's grandiose promises as the only way out from their current life.

This theory is further supported by the fact that the great majority of recruits to the Islamic State continue to go to Syria with the intention of acting there rather than training to become domestic terrorists” (TSG 2015, pg. 7). While this theory does not completely hold up in lieu of the November 2015 Paris terror attacks, there is simply not enough information about the 30,000 people who have taken up ISIS’s call to definitely determine why exactly every person travels to Syria.

Without a doubt, al-Qaeda makes a similar promise in creating an Islamic utopia. The main difference between al-Qaeda and ISIS is that al-Qaeda leadership “cast the establishment of a caliphate as a long-term, almost utopian goal: educating and mobilizing the *ummah* [Islamic clerics] came first” (Cronin 2015). Though still far from true Islam, al-Qaeda at least adhered to many radical Islamist principles such as abstaining from women and alcohol while ISIS offers its fighters female slaves and other indulgences. ISIS on the other hand stresses the present day and its actual success in seizing territory give a sense of legitimacy to its more impossible promises. In addition to stressing the present-day, ISIS focuses more on the average fighter compared with al-Qaeda. According to Miller and Mekhennet,

Al-Qaeda’s releases always exalted its leaders, particularly Osama bin Laden. But the Islamic State’s propaganda is generally focused on its fighters and followers. Appearances by leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi or his senior lieutenants have been rare. Rejecting the lecture format employed by al-Qaeda, the Islamic State’s videos are cinematic, emphasizing dramatic scenes, stylized transitions and special effects (Miller & Mekhennet 2015).

A more flashy and adrenaline fueled propaganda video production seems to align more with the new mainstream extremism strain championed by ISIS. This strategy of pandering to the individual as the primary motor for change appears to have struck a chord with radical youths around the world yearning for something different compared to the stale al-Qaeda message that has gone unchanged over the past fifteen years. As Cronin puts it, “[t]he group attracts followers yearning for not only religious righteousness but also adventure, personal power, and a sense of

self and community. And, of course, some people just want to kill” (Cronin 2015). To summarize as simply as possible in Cronin’s words, after parceling through the propaganda of religious and anti-western sentiment, the crux of what ISIS has to offer is “short-term, primitive gratification” (Cronin 2015). However, sometimes the simplest messages can be the toughest to debunk, as it is very difficult to reason with people when they did not use reason and logic in the first place.

ISIS’s long-term viabilities remains questionable to say the least and this makes foreigners’ decisions to uproot their lives all the more illogical. Furthermore, this realization makes finding those who have returned to their home country all the more important in chronicling their decision-making and transformation into an ISIS fighter. TSG seconds this assertion by saying:

The understanding of motivation, both of those who join and of those who leave, remains of key importance—not just in helping to ensure the deployment of scarce resources to where they are most needed, but also in identifying returnees who can undermine the appeal of the Islamic State by speaking with credibility and authority about its true nature (TSG 2015, pg. 7).

However, little to nothing is known about these individuals and their intentions for returning home. While many point to a repeat Paris attack as their true intention, hundreds, maybe even thousands of people have reportedly returned to countries around the world in the past year with no attack following. Although this does not mean all foreign fighters do not still hold radical views, it may indicate that many of these people became disillusioned with ISIS once they arrived in Syria. As TSG indicates, these disillusioned people may be the international community’s best weapon in debunking ISIS’s utopian mythology.

There have already been numerous high profile cases of young people arriving in Syria, only then wanting to return home after realizing the true nature of ISIS. According to the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, numerous French recruits now in Syria have communicated their distress

and wanted to come back home. According to one communication, translated by *The Telegraph*, “I’ve basically done nothing except hand out clothes and food,” wrote one, who wants to return from Aleppo. “I also help clean weapons and transport dead bodies from the front. Winter’s arrived here. It’s begun to get really hard” (Alexander 2015). Others complained about living life under perpetual siege and feared they would be killed since they did not know how to fight. The most gruesome instance cited was with one Frenchman, who was rumored to have been beheaded when he explained to the local emir that he wanted to follow his friend home, who had already left. (Alexander 2015). Another report emerged in 2015 of a teenage Austrian girl reportedly beaten to death in Raqqa after she was caught trying to escape from Syria (Boyle 2015). While it is impossible to determine how many people regret their decision, regret appears to be the exception as opposed to the norm. However, all these instances show just how powerful ISIS’s recruitment pitch can be, which makes understanding the recruitment process all the more necessary.

### **Hotbed Neighborhoods**

Even though ISIS recruitment around the world obviously is done differently depending on the country and recruiter, some distinct patterns are apparent. Depending on the country and area, social media can only go so far as to convince someone to go to Syria. According to TSG, “as hotbeds develop, recruitment through social media becomes less important than via direct human contact, as clusters of friends and neighbors persuade each other to travel separately or together to join the Islamic State” (TSG 2015, pg. 10). The existence of these hotbeds is arguably the most important universal pattern that has emerged over the past year in terms of recruitment. Some of the most notorious neighborhoods include the Bizerte and Ben Gardane in Tunisia; Derna in Libya; the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia; and the Molenbeek district of Brussels (TSG



2015, pg. 10). Though these places appear to have no connection or similarities with one another, TSG describes these areas as containing “close-knit groups of susceptible youth, often lacking a sense of purpose or belonging outside their own circle” (TSG 2015, pg. 10). Because joining ISIS and severing all ties with one’s old life is completely illogical and irrational, TSG believes “the involvement of family or a close acquaintance in the radicalization process is a frequent determinant of the outcome”, though not universal (TSG 2015, pg. 10). Thus, in these tightly interwoven, impoverished neighborhoods, once one person becomes an active ISIS member, more follow.

To further understand the process and dynamics in these communities requires studying them in two entirely different countries: Belgium and Tunisia. According to TSG, more than a third of Tunisia’s 7,000 foreign fighters originated in three areas: Ben Gardane, Bizerte, and Tunis (TSG 2015, pg. 11). TSG specifically cites Ben Gardane, which singularly accounts for over 15% of fighters, as “an infamous smuggling hub, with generations raised on evading and defying government authority” (TSG 2015, pg. 11-12). This neighborhood’s association with organized crime is important in the sense that those associated know how to evade the government and effectively cross borders, two hurdles many struggle to overcome. In addition, the underlying anti-government and isolationist sentiment makes these people even more susceptible to recruiters. Even with the reforms that came after the Arab Spring uprising five years ago, the Tunisian government has been dogged by ineffectiveness and corruption. Combine these factors, and suddenly, youth in this community has both the ways and the motivation to leave Tunisia and fight in Syria.

In the case of Molenbeek, a relatively poor Muslim-majority neighborhood in Brussels, a few more dynamics come into question. The majority of its residences are either first or second-

generation immigrants, often from Morocco. Many people point out that Molenbeek is one of the poorest areas in Brussels. However, simply blaming poverty for the explosion of jihadists in the neighborhood doesn't explain the prevalent tensions that exist within Belgian society. Instead, more factors may be behind the spike not only in Molenbeek, but also throughout Belgium, which is now home to roughly 800 jihadists, 450 in Brussels, 85 of which come from Molenbeek (Ruffini 2016). With a national population of just over 11 million, Belgium has the unfortunate title of having the highest jihadist ratio in the western world. When attempting to formulate exactly why Belgium has turned into a jihadist hotbed, the typical arguments of poverty and governmental meddling in the Middle East do not hold up, as Belgium barely has a functioning armed military and is routinely ranked in the top twenty of GDP per capita.

Instead, the root cause may be found with the lack of integration between minority immigrants and the rest of the national community. Without feeling apart of a country, people feel less attached to society and thus feel they do not have a stake in its future. This is not necessarily blaming one group or another for the divide, but it is undeniable that a barrier exists between the Muslims of Molenbeek and the rest of Brussels and country as a whole. One of the most obvious instances of such a barrier existing is the issue of language itself. For example, CBS News conducted an interview at the Al Khalil mosque, the largest and most influential in Molenbeek, to speak with Imam Mohammed Tojgani about radicalization. According to the report, “[h]e spoke through a translator because he does not speak French or Flemish, only Arabic -- not uncommon for residents of this neighborhood” (Ruffini 2016). The issue with this is simple; only a small percentage of the country speaks Arabic so it is impossible for the Imam and anyone else in the same position to communicate with the majority of the country. This makes it nearly impossible for traditional Belgians to understand the issues facing this minority

community and vice a versa. Either the state is failing such immigrants in not giving them the tools necessary to learn the local language or the immigrants do not feel obligated to learn French or Flemish, or a combination of both.

To further fuel distrust and a lack of hope, the unemployment rate of those under the age of 35 is over 30 percent (Ames 2015). According to Nouredine Imnadine, a Moroccan-born architect, “there's not so much work around for this younger generation, so you have these kids hanging around on the streets, feeling excluded, stigmatized, angry” (Ames 2015). Thus, more street crime has ensued and has resulted in poor local relationships with law enforcement, which has led to further isolation. To make matters worse, there are also reports of Molenbeek becoming more religiously and culturally intolerant. Teun Voeten, an international photojournalist who lived in Molenbeek, paints a bleak and shockingly intolerant picture of Molenbeek. He says, “[a]lcohol became unavailable in most shops and supermarkets; I heard stories of fanatics at the Comte des Flandres metro station who pressured women to wear the veil; Islamic bookshops proliferated... Openly gay people were routinely intimidated” (Voeten 2015). Voeten then goes on to describe how youths on the street would tend to gravitate towards more organized gangs who would then introduce them to radical clerics living throughout the neighborhood. Sometimes, those radicalizing youths would be siblings, neighbors, and family friends. Such an environment containing an undercurrent of disenfranchisement that relies on close family relationships is ideal for ISIS and the results have showed.

This pattern falls in line with TSG’s assessment of how ISIS prefers to recruit through personal family connections. This, combined with cultural alienation can turn out to be one of the main motivations in turning to radicalization. To make matters worse, politicians have repeatedly failed to cope with the area’s basic issues and have instead led to more polarization.

According to Ali Benabid, a local social worker, “[t]he right fueled alienation by blaming the whole community for crime and social problems...while the left turned a blind eye to intolerance from religious conservatives because of political correctness or fear of losing votes. Moderate Muslims were caught in the middle” (Ames 2015). Blaming the whole community for issues caused by a select group of people would completely alienate the Molenbeek residents.

Furthermore, not acknowledging that Molenbeek has a radical Islamist issue only worsens the current situation. Bringing the community as a whole out of isolation and giving it the tools to succeed and interact with the rest of the population while clamping down on radical clerics and street gangs should be seen as consensus big picture solutions. Though achieving these goals is easier said than done, the first step in doing so is acknowledging that these are the biggest issues facing the community and country, something apparently that is far from happening. However, Belgium is certainly not the only country sorely lacking a coherent response to ISIS’s propaganda and recruitment machine.

### **International Response**

To date, the international response to ISIS’s media operation and foreign fighter flow has been largely ineffective. Much of this failure can be attributed to the unprecedented nature of the issue of restricting so many faceless individuals from the Internet around the world. One cannot simply shut off the Internet from various people, as some would believe. Instead, the issue should focus on more realistic alternatives such as expanding global intelligence sharing and providing assistance for those who are most at risk to falling under a recruiter’s sphere of influence. In terms of combating foreign fighters, until people understand ISIS’s utopian goal can resonate with any disillusioned person, regardless of religion and economic status, the international community will continue to show the same level of ineffectiveness.

To start, the international community has to recognize that in order to debunk much of ISIS's propaganda, they first must curb ISIS's victories in Iraq, Syria, and rest of the world. This is due to the fact that ISIS's propaganda machine feeds off such victories and if their gains get reversed, their job of painting an optimistic picture of the caliphate is suddenly much more difficult. Miller and Mekhennet introduce another dynamic of physically removing ISIS's media capacity through airstrikes and raids on media outlets throughout Syria and Iraq. They cite recent U.S. airstrikes, which have "killed several high-level operatives in the Islamic State's media division, including Junaid Hussain, a British computer expert" (Miller & Mekhennet 2015). Even more recently, U.S. airstrikes killed nearly thirty ISIS media members and a radio station that they used in Afghanistan for propaganda purposes. Though the fact that ISIS even has access to the radio airwaves in Afghanistan is deeply problematic, rendering the equipment useless and actually carrying out the raid is a positive step.

In terms of curbing the flow of foreign fighters into Syria, the international community must first and foremost focus on finding people before they enter the country. That starts with closing off the porous Turkish-Syrian border. The fact that the border remains relatively open nearly five years into the conflict shows just how disjointed the international coalition to defeat ISIS really is. A more realistic short-term goal may instead be to utilize international agencies such as Interpol to actively find relatives of families who believe they may have recently attempted to travel to Syria. By pooling resources into agencies tasked with finding missing people, countries may be able to stop its citizens before they cross from Turkey into Syria.

While not the first to do so, ISIS has successfully created a media conglomerate that can reach practically any audience in any part of the world. Today, ISIS has online profiles on every meaningful social media site and accounts in every major language. Thanks to their territorial

incursions in the Middle East and high profile terror attacks around the world, ISIS has completely supplanted al-Qaeda as the most prominent global terror groups and has reaped the benefits of online support and foreign fighters. Though impressive and complex, ISIS's media team would not generate the results seen today without their notable military and territorial achievements of the past few years. Furthermore, ISIS has successfully tapped into the new generation of jihadi fighters who scoff at al-Qaeda's stale video productions and message of patience. Instead ISIS preaches the here and now, and convinces people that they could start a new life in the caliphate. Time will tell how much longer ISIS's media blitz will garner the same level of unprecedented success. Much of this uncertainty hinges on the international community's overall ability and willingness to curb and ultimately destroy ISIS, which starts with neutralizing its strongest recruitment tool, which is its territorial sovereignty.

# **Chapter V: The Case for Intervention and Potential Solutions**

Because ISIS professes to be a caliphate encompassing thousands of miles of territory and millions of inhabitants, their territorial sovereignty must be challenged. Within the borders of their self-proclaimed caliphate, ISIS is able to sustain itself at least for the near future, train fighters, manufacture explosives, and most sophisticatedly, paint the illusion to susceptible outsiders that they are building a utopian society. Aside from the general lack of unity and actual airstrikes that significantly hamper the operation from the onset, the strategy of an international air campaign and containment has not produced any meaningful progress in destroying the group. An air campaign alone does not work because the majority of ISIS fighters along with their supplies are located in urban and populated areas, making the idea of widespread airstrikes impossible. Thus, the majority of airstrikes tend to attack convoys traveling through rural areas along with oil refineries. With all these facts considered, the only way to truly destroy ISIS is to neutralize the group's territorial sovereignty, and the only way to do that, especially in urban areas, is with a ground campaign.

### **The Cons of One Dimensional Strategy**

The simple truth is that the current one dimensional air campaign is not a sustainable long-term policy. This is not to say airstrikes have had no impact on the group, but that it is not solving any of the fundamental problems in the region. It may work in rural areas and successfully pick off some quantity of fighters, but airstrikes will do no more than that. In addition, the whole idea of containment is humanitarily counterintuitive; waiting for ISIS to run out of resources and implode on themselves is also condemning the local people stranded in its territory to the same fate. ISIS has shown no willingness to allow any humanitarian aid to its controlled areas and there is no reason to expect a softening of their position. In the past year, outside the besieged Syrian city of Aleppo, ISIS militants set fire to hundreds of boxes of food



because the food originated in the United States (Wyke and Hall 2015). As of today, no major humanitarian groups can safely reach areas under ISIS's control for fear of attacks or outright rejection.

In recent months, the international community has accepted the fact that ISIS has been able to commit mass atrocities throughout its areas of control. This past February, the European Parliament concluded that ISIS has committed systematic genocide specifically, but not limited to minority Yazidi and Christian communities throughout Syria and Iraq (Rothschild 2016). While the United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs seconded the European Parliament and passed a resolution in September 2015 condemning ISIS of committing genocide against minority groups, the Obama administration has yet to use the same label in its description of ISIS's atrocities for unknown reasons (Toosi 2016). Unlike the Foreign Affairs Committee's latest resolution claiming that the Russian and Syrian governments are guilty of systematic war crimes in Syria, giving ISIS the genocide label has no international diplomatic consequences (Toosi 2016).

According to Amanda Rothschild, a Research Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, "[h]istory demonstrates that U.S. policy toward mass killing is truly democratic; much of the power ultimately rests in the hands of the American people" and cites the U.S.'s lack of action during the early stages of the Holocaust and whole duration of the Rwandan genocide as proof (Rothschild 2016). As of today, there appears to be very little appetite on the part of the American public for the U.S. to become more heavily involved in the conflict, which may explain the administration's reluctance to officially label ISIS as committing genocide. If the U.S. government were to officially condemn ISIS of

genocide, it would be much more difficult to justify in the very least not stepping up airstrikes or special operations within Syria and Iraq.

Aside from the humanitarian suffering and acts of genocide, eroding ISIS's territorial sovereignty would go a long way in rendering its greatest recruitment tool useless. As I have previously demonstrated, the core of ISIS's foreign recruitment strategy rests on the idea that recruits will be able to start a new and more promising life in the land of ISIS. Though this is a truly preposterous claim to many, through the use of videos and animation, recruiters have successfully convinced thousands of people that a utopian society is in reach. While this speaks towards the significant resentment many have towards their home country, the sheer power of ISIS's message speaks volumes.

The letdown many foreign fighters encounter after arriving in Syria upon realizing the utopian society preached by online recruiters was an online fabrication is real and apparent. In addition to the evidence already provided in previous chapters, an additional notable instance of this came in December 2014 report from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claiming that over the span of six months, ISIS had executed over 100 foreign fighters for conspiring to flee the caliphate (Al Jazeera 2014). The fact of the matter is that through its attainment of territorial sovereignty, ISIS has been able to orchestrate one of the most pronounced con jobs in the history of the Internet on some of the most susceptible youth around the world.

To make matters worse, the longer ISIS survives the international air campaign and maintains its territorial sovereignty; they will become more credible on the argument of their durability and ability to withstand attacks on their caliphate. While the majority of the outside world understands that airstrikes alone cannot outright defeat a group with such a large territory under control, the visualization of ISIS enduring in the face of American airpower (albeit very

limited) would play well in anti-western circles, especially in areas where ISIS and other terror groups are attempting to establish a presence. The longer ISIS is able to maintain the majority of its territory in Syria and Iraq, mainly in key urban areas, the more dangerous the group becomes. This stems from the fact that ISIS will likely continue to gain increased support among jihadists in other failing states throughout the Muslim world who will attempt to emulate their success as they continue to see ISIS withstand attacks from the West. We have already seen this effect start to manifest itself through pledges of allegiances to ISIS by Boko Haram in Nigeria, former Taliban brigades in Afghanistan, numerous terror groups in the Sinai (who carried out the Russian jet bombing), and most notably, tribes and jihadist groups in Libya.

### **Lessons From Libya**

The situation in Libya has gotten so tense that international observers now believe that Libya has succumbed to civil war and risks being overrun by ISIS supporters. After the U.S. and European air intervention that helped rebels overthrow Muammar Gadhafi, the country devolved into chaos and as Scott Shane and Jo Becker in a recent *New York Times* piece puts it, “leading to a civil war that would destabilize the region, fueling the refugee crisis in Europe and allowing the Islamic State to establish a Libyan haven that the United States is now desperately trying to contain” (Shane and Becker 2016). In her one trip to Libya after the fall of Gadhafi in 2011, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed, “It is a great privilege to see a new future for Libya being born. And indeed, the work ahead is quite challenging, but the Libyan people have demonstrated the resolve and resilience necessary to achieve their goals” (Shane and Becker 2016). While everything Secretary Clinton said in the subsequent weeks after the Libya air intervention was correct in theory, various factions of Libyans had their own and often-incompatible visions on what the future of Libya ought to be.

As a result, the reconstruction of the Libyan government devolved into warring political and tribal factions, which then created a governance and security vacuum throughout the country. These developments opened the door for jihadists such as ISIS to enter and grow in the lawless country once an announcement of a 2012 national election (in a country with no history of free elections) was prematurely made just months after deposing Gadhafi. The international community's ability to take control of Gadhafi's immense stockpiles of weapons in the aftermath proved impossible without any ground presence in the country. Shane and Becker outline this dilemma by citing former Defense Secretary Robert Gates:

While the C.I.A. moved quickly to secure Colonel Qaddafi's chemical weapons, other efforts fell short. "There was one arsenal that we thought had 20,000 shoulder-fired, surface-to-air missiles, SA-7s, that basically just disappeared into the maw of the Middle East and North Africa," recalled Robert M. Gates (Shane and Becker 2016).

While Gadhafi was said to have an impractical amount of weapons stashed away throughout the country, it nonetheless shows the possible blowback from conflicts in countries dominated by dictators and their military regimes. It also demonstrates the real likelihood that such sophisticated weapons will fall under the control of groups such as ISIS not only in Libya, but also in Syria and Iraq. Conversely, the only way to ensure that those weapons, let alone Assad's chemical stockpile that appears to still be at the very least partially inside the country, does not fall under the control of ISIS is with actual people on the ground in these various countries. Without outside eyes searching for them in these countries, the world cannot possibly know where they end up and who ultimately controls them.

There are many lessons we can learn from the limited Libyan intervention. However, the most notable lesson as it pertains to failed states is that regime change in a country accustomed to being ruled by dictators is a process that takes years to adequately complete. Because Gadhafi and his family controlled all aspects of governance, essentially no functioning state institutions

existed prior to the intervention and none exist today. Sarah Leah Whitson, who oversaw Libya's attempted transition for Human Rights Watch concluded, "If you are going to carry out a military intervention to decapitate the government, you are making a commitment to the stability of that country over the long haul" (Shane and Becker 2016). Even Secretary Clinton agreed with this point and wrote to one of her advisers, "Qaddafi ruled for 42 years by basically destroying all institutions and never even creating an army, so that it could not be used against him...So imagine how difficult it will be in a country like Libya" (Shane and Becker 2016). This pertains to the current state of affairs in Syria and Iraq in a major way in the sense of how the lack of functioning state institutions and security apparatus have completely splintered Iraq and Syria. It gets to the fact that there is simply no possible way to ensure that events on the ground won't devolve as they have repeatedly done without the presence of a peacekeeping force on the ground in the aftermath of these conflicts. Furthermore, as Shane and Becker put it,

A cynical line would begin to circulate in Washington: In Iraq, the United States had intervened and occupied — and things had gone to hell. In Libya, the United States had intervened but not occupied — and things had gone to hell. And in Syria, the United States had neither intervened nor occupied — and things had still gone to hell. (Shane and Becker 2016)

Such complex and intensive state building is thus completely necessary if the world seriously wants to prevent the ongoing cycles of violence from continuing along with the continuing expansion of ISIS internationally. ISIS's continual use of its territorial sovereignty to stage attacks and recruit foreign fighters makes neutralizing its territory an immediate need to reverse its momentum. In order to compromise its sovereignty while also preventing the factional devolution already seen in Syria, Iraq, and now Libya, a ground intervention in Syria and Iraq is fully necessary. However, due to the current state of the civil wars and geopolitical realities surrounding them, there is no clear or high-success probability solution. Therefore, it is important to understand that no matter what the international community does, the likelihood of

success will not be anywhere close to guaranteed. While intervention, albeit only through the air, ultimately failed in Libya, it speaks to our vast lack of understanding on the issues that plague these countries once strong-armed dictators are deposed. Instead of focusing on simply overthrowing dictators as we did in Libya, we must seek to help rebuild capable, functional, and uncorrupt state institutions to ensure people that the state has their best interests at heart. Furthermore, as we have seen in 2003 Iraq, an intervention must have a clear and attainable goal, which is why I ultimately do not advocate or assert that a united and democratic Syria and Iraq will result from my strategy.

### **How to Intervene**

If history has taught us one lesson, it is that the world is always changing. Likewise, the greatest emerging threats to world order will constantly change with the times. Over a decade ago, al-Qaeda was the only dominant terror group in a world still reeling from the implications of 9/11. Today, while al-Qaeda remains relevant in select areas of the world, it is abundantly clear that ISIS has taken up the title of most dangerous global terror group. Even with this seismic development, the world continues to look at the issue of ISIS in the same relative lens that they used with al-Qaeda. As I demonstrated throughout this paper, ISIS is in fact intricately different than al-Qaeda in nearly every regard. Thus, defeating ISIS requires a new strategy. Furthermore, ISIS's governing, propaganda, and military capabilities are all far and beyond what we have seen any other modern terror group possess. Thanks to ISIS's geographic location and direct involvement in the already geopolitically dense Syrian and Iraqi civil wars, a solution for ISIS must also include solutions for ending the wars. If we as an international community only singularly focus on destroying ISIS without addressing the civil wars, ISIS will only not be defeated, but more groups will attempt to emulate its success. Without the civil wars, ISIS would

not nearly be what it is today and without ISIS, the civil wars would not have been as chaotic as they currently are.

There are two major issues that have crippled the American policy the past fifteen years in the Middle East. First, the Bush administration's significant underestimation of the underlying religious tensions facing Iraq. The second major issue has been the weakness of the Iraqi state institutions. The Obama administration on the other hand committed arguably an even greater mistake by implementing incoherent and inconsistent policies with no clear intention other than to remove American troops from the Middle East. Withdrawing American forces from the region is a perfectly coherent immediate action, but the failure to articulate the U.S.'s new vision for the region has significantly hindered the U.S.'s ability to mediate such political conflicts.

### **Where it All Went Wrong for the United States in the Middle East**

It is always easy with the benefit of hindsight to examine how, if at all, these conflicts could have been avoided. However, it is important to do so for the simple reason history can never be erased or forgotten. Joseph Stalin once said that history towers over the present like a mountain and in the case of the Middle East, this is especially true. Much of what ails the Middle East occurred nearly 100 years ago with the historic Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. This agreement between the British and French colonial powers was meant to define proposed spheres of influence in lieu of the impending Ottoman collapse in World War I. More importantly for today, the agreement also created new boundaries and territories, specifically the states of Iraq and Syria. These nations became comprised of a blend of various sectarian groups, which we now see waging open war with one another.

The three major sectarian groups in Iraq, the Sunni, Shia, and ethnic Kurds all have significant long-standing divides with one another, even before the US invasion in 2003. As

Khedery puts it, “[s]ince the founding of modern Iraq in 1920, the country has rarely witnessed extended peace and stability” (Khedery 2015). The majority Shia population was subject to decades of rule by the Sunni Baathist party under the Saddam Hussein regime. While they were not outright killed as hundreds of thousands of Kurds were in the 1980s, Shia were nonetheless closer to second-class citizens while the minority Sunnis ruled Iraq. Many argue that the only reason Iraq did not disintegrate before the 2003 war was because of Saddam’s ruthlessness and his dictatorial control over everything and everyone in the country. Once he was deposed along with existing state institutions, it only took one initial wave of violence to completely throw the whole country into chaos and all out religious civil war. This does not mean that the U.S. invasion was doomed to fail from the beginning, but that the odds were certainly significantly stacked against its success, which makes the decision to invade all the more confounding. All it would take was one minor slipup by the US, which came in the form of completely disbanding the longstanding Iraqi security and state institutional apparatus that had helped keep relative order for decades. The Bush administration completely failed to even consider the possibility of a Sunni insurgency even though every indicator pointed to such an event occurring.

Even with all the calamities that ensued through 2007, the U.S. military surge in Iraq gave the U.S. an opportunity to at least salvage Iraq and its future had the Obama administration not totally withdrew from the country in December 2010. Many defenders of the administration point to the fact that Prime Minister Maliki opposed any continued American military presence in the country over the debate on whether U.S. soldiers should be provided with immunity. However, in his 2014 book “Worthy Fights”, former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta wrote, “[t]o my frustration, the White House coordinated the negotiations but never really led them. Officials there seemed content to endorse an agreement if State and Defense could reach one, but without



the President's active advocacy, al-Maliki was allowed to slip away. The deal never materialized" (factcheck.org). Though it is typical for partisans and chronic critics of the Obama administration to raise such discourse, the fact that President Obama's own defense secretary is claiming the President did not try hard enough is particularly damaging.

While it was unrealistic to believe Iraq would become a 'normal' and stable country in the immediate future, President Obama at the time hailed the withdrawal as a victory for the American and Iraqi people. Just as President Bush was naïve in making his ill-famed "Mission Accomplished" speech aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, President Obama was equally naïve in calling Iraq in early 2011 "sovereign, stable, and self-reliant" for the long-term. Instead, Iraq would be stable for less than a year with its sovereignty in the north and west erased by ISIS in 2014. Today, the Iraqi government is almost entirely reliant on Iranian controlled Shia militias to hold what territory the government has left as the U.S. attempts to once again rebuild the Iraqi military. To summarize the U.S. venture into Iraq from 2003 through today, the mission is still not accomplished thanks to one administration's lack of understanding of the underlying religious and ethnic tensions pervasive in the country and another administration's either completely naïve outlook on the facts on the ground or an equally foolhardy attempt to prioritize fulfilling a campaign pledge to end the war no matter the situation on the ground or military pleas to the contrary. Panetta writes, "[t]o this day, I believe that a small U.S. troop presence in Iraq could have effectively advised the Iraqi military on how to deal with al-Qaeda's resurgence and the sectarian violence that has engulfed the country" (factcheck.org).

With all that said, it would be unfair and untrue to solely pin Iraq's demise on 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial power brokers and the 21<sup>st</sup> century's global superpower. The fact remains that Iraq in 2011 was left in a moderately stable state, but quickly deteriorated thanks to exclusion

and power grabbing policies adopted by the Maliki government. Khedery argues that the U.S. intervention ultimately failed “because it empowered a new set of elites who drew their legitimacy almost purely from divisive ethno-sectarian agendas rather than from visions of truth, reconciliation, the rule of law, and national unity” (Khedery 2015). For further proof of Maliki’s sectarianism, there have been numerous reports of mass killings carried out by Shia militias on Sunni villages with the knowledge of the Iraqi government. This isolated the powerful Sunni tribes of Anbar Province, the most important group of people who once helped the U.S. eradicate many of the jihadists that fought for al-Qaeda in Iraq. It was difficult enough the first time in 2007 to convince the Sunni tribes to invest themselves in the future of a unified Iraq, but with all the recent sectarianism by the Iraqi government and general abandonment by American leadership, it would appear extremely unlikely that the tribes would ever trust the U.S. or Iraqi government again in the near future.

The demise of Syria is a much more recent phenomena with its origins stemming from the Arab Spring of 2011. In Syria, ever since the Assad family took power in a 1970 coup, all business and politics hinged on either being in the family’s inner circle or creating personal connections through bribes. This rampant corruption along with mass detentions of dissenters all under the regime’s continued insistence that Syria was in fact a democracy made the country a prime target for the Arab Spring once it began in Tunisia and Egypt. In addition to these underlying issues, because the Assad regime is a longtime ally of Iran and the militant group Hezbollah, many protesters believed that the United States would rally to the support of the protest movement.

Based on the Obama administration’s proclamation that longtime ally Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak “must go” as they put it, many expected the U.S. to quickly take just as strong or

an even more affirmative stance in insisting President Assad abdicate in a similar nature. According to Warrick, “Arab leaders lambasted Obama for symbolically abandoning Mubarak, a longtime U.S. ally, while he remained the country’s legitimate head of state” (Warrick 2015, pg. 232). However, other than U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford’s noteworthy trip to the protests in Hama after word came that the regime was amassing tank and troop divisions to disperse protests, no official action was taken. As the regime began regularly unleashing military equipment on protestors, the administration came out with no such ultimatum in the months that followed. In August 2011, roughly six months since the conflict began, President Obama finally declared that President Assad must go. While the word of a U.S. President does not impact the decisions of a dictator such as Assad, a more immediate denouncement would have clearly affirmed the U.S.’s stance and may have catalyzed international discussions to remove Assad sooner than how it ultimately played out.

As Syria was descending into an all out civil war between the regime and protesters with the looming specter of jihadists hijacking the cause, the rebels begged for foreign assistance from neighboring countries, most notably the U.S. However, many officials worried about the vetting process in identifying who the rebels really were and if they had any connections to emerging terror networks in the region. Finally, once the CIA program to train and support moderate Syria rebels was approved in 2013, “the White House imposed strict limits on both the scale of the training operation and the kinds of weapons and ammunition the fighters would receive. CIA-backed fighters were paid \$100 to \$150 a month, less than half the salary offered by the Islamists” (Warrick 2015, pg. 271). Concerns about whether U.S. weapons would fall into the wrong hands as had happened in Afghanistan with the Taliban was certainly a legitimate concern, but then why pay vetted fighters such a low and uncompetitive wage?

Warrick even cites one rebel commander, who complained that his soldiers received on average only sixteen bullets per month (Warrick 2015, pg. 271). This limited support is completely unjustifiable whether one supported or opposed the initiative. If the administration was afraid that some rebels might be jihadists, then they should not have even trained and supplied them. If the rebels had successfully passed background checks, then why insult them with such meager supplies? The answer many rebels surmised was that the Americans were not serious about supporting their cause and their overall lack of weapons forced them to ally themselves with well stocked militant groups such as al-Nusra (al-Qaeda) and ISIS to avoid the wrath of Assad.

Syrians desperation in the face of Assad's bombardment can be summed up best by Yousef al-Boustany, a Douma resident, who has lost dozens of relatives and been under siege for much of the conflict. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, he says, "Assad is massacring us... We don't support the Islamic State, but if its fighters came here to save us, believe me, the people would welcome them with open arms" (Naylor 2015). To further show the dilemma of many rebels, Warrick cites once secular rebel source as saying "[i]t [the American initiative] was a losing bet" (Warrick 2015, pg. 272). In the wake of receiving a surplus of military food rations, but no anti aircraft missiles to take down Assad's fighter jets, one rebel leader mockingly asked Senator John McCain, who visited a U.S. identified moderate group (who now has only one living officer out of an original twelve), "[a]m I supposed to throw pizzas at those airplanes?" (Warrick 2015, pg. 293).

This general reluctance to get America involved in the war reached its nadir during President Obama's "red line" failure in the summer of 2013. In this instance, the Assad regime was accused of launching chemical gas attacks on rebel strongholds that ultimately killed over

1,400 civilians, which was in violation of countless international laws, human rights accords, and chemical weapons treaties. The victims symptoms were consisted with exposure to Sarin gas, which the United Nations was even able to verify on the ground. In a passionate speech in response to the attack, President Obama asked, "[w]hat kind of world will we live in if the United States of America sees a dictator brazenly violate international law with poison gas and we choose to look the other way?" In past instances, the administration declared that any use of chemical weapons would be a major escalation and the red line for the U.S. to begin involving itself in the war.

However, in the weeks that followed, numerous Congressional leaders opposed the administration's limited airstrike strategy being presented, some simply because they opposed American intervention while others argued the provisions were too limited to be effective. In the end, the U.S. secured a deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who would take charge of disposing Syria's entire chemical weapons stockpile. Even after all weapons were allegedly disposed of, the Assad regime continues to use chlorine gas bombs on civilians and ISIS has recently been able to produce small amounts of chemical weapons. Just this past March during the latest ceasefire attempt, Israel accused the Assad regime of violating the brokered truce by once again using military grade chemical weapons on populated areas (Reuters 2016). Among Syria's most notable opposition leaders, "the collapse, in their view, of Western resolve after the Ghouta attack [the regime's sarin gas attack] was a tougher psychological blow than the chemical attacks themselves...Some rebel groups had previously aligned themselves with the moderate Free Syrian Army simply gave up and joined the Islamists, who at least paid better salaries" (Warrick 2015, pg. 294). Moustafa, a prominent rebel leader who spoke to Warrick, describes the letdown after the U.S. backed down from their red line:

People had been ecstatic when they believed the U.S. was finally going to act...It was one of those moments when everyone remembers exactly where they were. The regime was scared. We were hearing reports of people fleeing Damascus. Even the idea of bombs falling didn't cause concern. It was, like, 'Thank God. Even if we die in the bombings, at least things will change. And then, when nothing happened—that was the end (Warrick 2015, pg. 294).

In the end, what doomed the Obama administration's strategy in the Middle East was that they never decided on one until the moderate rebels who had started the revolution were either outright defeated or hopelessly outmatched and joined better funded militant groups such as ISIS. The biggest failure committed by the Obama administration was that they set parameters and red lines that they were not actually ready to enforce, thus giving rebels who have been sieged and ruthlessly attacked by the regime for years, false hope, which turned into outright anger. Kenneth Pollack, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute, seconds this assessment and writes, "[t]he Obama administration's policies toward the region are not designed to mitigate, let alone end, its real problems" because they are having minimal effects both on ISIS and the course of the Syrian civil war" (Pollack 2016).

Numerous former Obama administration officials have aired their frustration with the lack of progress in articulating a coherent Middle Eastern policy. Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta saw the issues of halfheartedly supporting the rebels at a White House Situation Room meeting in 2012 where he said, "[w]e're outside the game... We don't have any credibility with [Syrian moderates]. We're giving them nonlethal assistance and they're dying" (Warrick 2015, pg. 279). Panetta's predecessor, Robert Gates, who had worked for every president since Nixon, and was asked to continue on working for President Obama's administration, shared similar frustrations. In a recent interview with Business Insider, Gates said:

Backing away from reacting once the red line was crossed impacted American credibility not just in the Middle East, but I think it was being watched in Moscow and Tehran and Beijing and Pyongyang and elsewhere...So not acting in response to crossing the red line was a serious mistake in my view...The rest of the world must know that when the president of the United States draws a red line, that it is dangerous, if not fatal, to cross it (Engel 2016).

To make matters worse, Panetta and Gates' replacement, Chuck Hagel, has aired similar grievances. In a December 2015 interview with *Foreign Policy*, Hagel said, "[t]here's no question in my mind that it [Obama's red line] hurt the credibility of the president's word when this occurred...A president's word is a big thing, and when the president says things, that's a big deal" (De Luce 2015). On whether the U.S. was prepared to come to the aid of U.S. backed rebels if they were attacked by Assad, Hagel said, "[w]e had never come down on an answer or a conclusion in the White House...It's a damn crucial question...because I'm getting this from all of my colleagues around the world. All of my counterparts are coming up to me at NATO meetings and everywhere, saying, 'What are you doing? Where is this going?'" (De Luce 2015).

The fact that all three of President Obama's former Defense Secretaries have had such similar and outspoken criticism of the administration demonstrates the real concern regarding the lack of a coherent U.S. policy message. The risk of acting must always be weighed against the risk of inaction, but in the case of Syria, it is hard to imagine that an earlier U.S. intervention would have left the region as hopelessly fractured as we find it today. Furthermore, this inaction and uncertainty conveyed by American leadership along with the festering civil wars throughout the region has led to neighboring countries taking their national interests into their own hands.

### **The Unruly Neighbors**

To demonstrate this geopolitical free-for-all, it is important to first understand the specific circumstances surrounding the intentions of the participatory states, which includes Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iran, and Russia. This will also help us understand what each of these countries has at stake in the conflict and how their ultimate visions for Iraq and Syria are significantly different compared with one another. Andrew Tabler, a Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy writes, [a]s most of the world has stood by and

watched Syria's disintegration, regional powers have been busy claiming spheres of influence in the country in the name of security and humanitarian assistance" (Tabler 2015). The first overarching goal of neighboring states ought to simply be to stabilize the region. The longer the civil wars in Iraq and Syria along with ISIS continue to go unchecked, the implications of this will continue to be felt in the most vulnerable countries. In the case of these conflicts, the countries that face the most immediate threat from conflict are the countries that border Iraq, Syria, and now Libya. According to Pollack, "civil wars have a bad habit of spilling over into their neighbors...scholars have found that the strongest predictor that a state will experience a civil war is whether it borders a country already embroiled in one" (Pollack 2016). Over the past five years, neighboring countries such as Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia have all attempted to limit the spillover from Syria and Iraq with varying levels of success. However, as long as these wars continue and ISIS continues to attract thousands of followers, each neighboring country's overall stability will be in danger. Thus, these states will continue to increasingly take matters into their own hands and risk causing new conflicts within the already existing wars.

Outside the concept of simply ending the wars, there is no universal strategy to do so nor is there an ultimate consensus on what the states of Iraq and Syria ought to look like once the violence ends. Much of the disagreement stems from religious and sectarian fears each side has of one another. The most encompassing of these conflicts is the geopolitical Sunni-Shia conflict currently playing out between Shia Iran and the Sunni Gulf states. Ever since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Saudis have feared a Shia takeover of the country facilitated by Iranian backed militias. Today, an alliance exists between the Assad regime, Shia militias in Iraq



and Syria, Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia. Every action each Assad ally has taken throughout the war was meant to keep Assad in power and curb back Sunni influence in the region.

Since the American withdrawal from the country, the Iraqi government had shifted diplomatically towards friendlier relations with Iran. This relationship only became tighter once ISIS routed the Iraqi military and now must rely overwhelmingly on Shia militias directly funded by Iran. Just this past January, Human Rights Watch reported that “[m]embers of Shia militias, who the Iraqi government has included among its state forces, abducted and killed scores of Sunni residents in a central Iraq town and demolished Sunni homes, stores, and mosques following January 11, 2016 bombings claimed by the extremist group Islamic State” (Human Rights Watch 2016). This type of state-sponsored vengeance only feeds into the ISIS propaganda machine and draws moderate Sunnis abandoned by the international community and their Iraqi government towards ISIS out of sheer necessity. While many cultural differences remain between Persian Iran and Arab Iraq, the mere fact that Iran now holds such sway over the Shia areas of Iraq demonstrates the desperation of the Iraqi government and the total lack of influence the United States now has in dictating events in Iraq.

These Iranian backed militias have begun playing an intricate role in the war in Syria as well. There have been numerous instances of Shia militias traveling from Syria to Iraq to fight other rebel groups. According to Andrew Tabler, “Iran is sending record numbers of Hezbollah and Shia militiamen and billions of dollars annually to assist the Bashar al-Assad regime in western Syria” (Tabler 2015). Furthermore, Iranian and Russian soldiers have been deployed to Syria and in the fall 2015, Russia commenced a massive air campaign to solidify the Assad regime. While many would expect these actions to translate into overwhelming attacks on ISIS, the opposite has been true. According to U.S. State Department spokesman John Kirby,

“[g]reater than 90% of the strikes that we’ve seen them take to date have not been against Isil [ISIS] or al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists” (Agence France Presse in Washington 2015). This is because contrary to Russia’s insistence, it is clear that its primary goal is not to destroy ISIS, but to increase its influence in the region.

To do so, Russia cannot afford to lose an ally in Assad, who allows Russia to operate its only Mediterranean naval base on the Syrian coast and undermine historic adversaries such as Turkey and the United States. Thus, the Russians have mercilessly bombed moderate rebel strongholds in the northwestern areas of the country, sometimes even the most populated areas. As a result, *The Guardian* has reported that there have been at least 1,000 Syrian civilians killed in Russian airstrikes since their campaign began and with very limited humanitarian access to these areas, the death toll is likely much higher (Agence France-Presse in Beirut 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Defense, since the U.S. announced its roughly sixty-member coalition and commenced airstrikes in late 2014, America has launched on average, seven airstrikes per day on ISIS targets (U.S. Defense Special Report: Inherent Resolve 2016). Since September 2015, that number has dropped to less than three (Jones and Sevastopulo 2016). Conversely, Russia has launched roughly sixty airstrikes per day in Syria on civilians, moderate rebels and some ISIS positions, per the Russian Defense Ministry. This overwhelming Russian air power combined with the Assad regime’s continued indiscriminant bombing has significantly tilted the course of the war directly in Assad’s favor. While these airstrikes may have inflicted damage on ISIS, the group has been able to position itself as the only true defenders of Sunnis and will continue to attract recruits, especially from Muslim territories of the Caucuses and Central Asia who see Russian involvement as a war on Sunni Islam.

The Sunni states of the Middle East conversely bare considerable blame for how events have unfolded in these various conflicts. Out of fear of Kurdish unification, Turkey has resisted calls to support Kurdish militias along its borders in the fight against ISIS. Instead, the Turkish government has not secured their border to stem the flow of ISIS fighters because ISIS is the only group standing in the way to prevent Kurdish groups organizing into a new state of their own along the border. This stems from Turkey's long and dark conflicts with Kurdish rebels in the southeastern areas of the country.

Even in the beginning of the Syrian war, Turkey and the Gulf states opted to fund radical Islamists groups that have now been absorbed into the ranks of al-Qaeda's local affiliate, al-Nusra. According to *The Independent*, "The two countries are focusing their backing for the Syrian rebels on the combined Jaish al-Fatah, or the Army of Conquest, a command structure for jihadist groups in Syria" (Sengupta 2015). The paper alleges, "Mr Erdogan stressed to Saudi officials that the lack of Western action in Syria, especially the failure to impose a "no-fly zone", meant that regional powers now needed to come together and take the lead to help the opposition" even though American forces have bombed the very same extremists Erdogan and the Saudis are allegedly throwing their support behind (Sengupta 2015). Based on this, it is fair to deduce that these states ultimately concluded that radical Islamists would be a better alternative to the Assad regime and Iranian-Russian influence and an independent Kurdish state just across their borders. In the specific case of Turkey, its renewed tensions with Russia along with the controversial downing of a Russian warplane that had violated Turkish airspace, Turkey may very well have deduced that such radical groups such as ISIS preoccupy Russia and possesses the greatest chance of furthering their regional ambitions.

According to Jeffrey Mankoff, the Acting Director and Senior Fellow with the Center for Strategic and International Studies Russia and Eurasia Program, “in the span of two years, the two countries [Turkey and Russia] have largely undone the entente they had built over the past 15” (Mankoff 2016). Stemming from Russia’s recent incursions into nearby Ukraine and Georgia along with new Russian sanctions on Turkish goods in response to Turkey’s downing of the Russian warplane in Syrian airspace, the Turkish government believes that Russia is actively seeking to shift the balance of power in the region squarely in Russian favor. In terms of Syria, Mankoff writes,

The war has been a disaster for Turkey. More than 2.5 million refugees have made their way to the country, and the PKK-linked Democratic Union Party (PYD) has established a Kurdish proto-state right on Turkey’s border, even as Ankara’s war with the PKK inside Turkey has heated up again... Russia understands that Turkey is under enormous strain from the refugee crisis, terrorist attacks linked to the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), and renewed warfare with the PKK, and seeks to press its advantage. (Mankoff 2016).

To make matters worse, the government of President Erdogan has been accused of violating Turkey’s democratic constitution numerous times by opposition leaders after he enacted measures that consolidated presidential power over parliament. Erdogan is certainly to blame for the renewed hostilities with the Kurds along with his serious domestic constitutional overreach. With such rampant chaos across their borders, a president in Erdogan’s position must prioritize bringing the country together regardless of politics. Unfortunately, Erdogan is yet another example of a Middle Eastern leader who has prioritized his personal ambition over the betterment of their country. While it is unrealistic for any country to successfully absorb such a large amount of refugees over a relatively short period of time, the ongoing political issues surrounding the president have significantly hindered any hope of public unification around solving these various issues.

From the Saudis perspective, their rationale to arm Islamists groups stems from the monarchy's attempt to keep their country stable as civil wars rage in bordering countries. Because Saudi Arabia is dominated by Wahhabism, a strict and old-fashioned interpretation of Islam, but also has a plurality of Shia in the oil-rich areas of the country, the government must constantly attempt to keep both sides at peace. Conversely, many wealthy Saudi individuals have allegedly donated large amounts of money to ISIS and al-Qaeda since 9/11, which shows the deep-seated culture of radical Islam that traditionally permeates in the country. According to the Washington Institute's Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "Riyadh has taken pleasure in recent ISIS-led Sunni advances against Iraq's Shiite government, and in jihadist gains in Syria at Bashar al-Assad's expense" (Boghardt 2014).

In addition, as the home of Osama Bin Laden and the majority of al-Qaeda's original leadership, Saudi Arabia has a tendency to produce large amounts of jihadists. The widespread presence of radical Islamist ideology runs deep in Saudi Arabia to an alarming degree. The acceptance and normalcy of medieval practices such as stoning, amputations, and beheading of prisoners is exactly the kind of practices that gave ISIS its universal notoriety. And yet, when Saudi Arabia beheads a convicted prisoner, it is simply an accepted Saudi custom. To further complicate matters, there have been substantiated claims that "Saudi Arabia's ruling elite distributed millions of dollars to Sunni extremists, including those within the US, in the run-up to the September 11th attacks [and after], under the guise of support for Islamic charities" (Chosky & Chosky 2015). Kamel Daoud, an Algerian journalist, provocatively writes, "how do you prevent future generations from turning to jihadism when the influence of Fatwa Valley [Saudi Arabia] and its clerics and its culture and its immense editorial industry remains intact?" (Daoud

2015). These are all serious questions that undermine any long-term solution to rid the world of ISIS and other terror groups.

However, ISIS has attempted to undermine the domestic security of the country in the past year by launching deadly attacks on Shia shrines with the hope of stoking sectarian tensions as Zargawi once did in Iraq. Bilal Y. Saab, a Senior Fellow for Middle East Security at the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security at the Atlantic Council backs up this assessment and points to “the number of alleged ISIS members who have been arrested—more than 400 thus far—is worrisome. What’s more concerning, not just for Saudi Arabia but also for U.S. officials, is that the vast majority of those captured are Saudi nationals with a bold list of Saudi and U.S. targets” (Saab 2015). Thus, the Saudis have the unenviable task of dismantling ISIS for the sake of Saudi Shias security while also appeasing the fundamental Wahhabis who expect the Saudi monarchy to support replacing the Assad regime with Islamists. While the Saudi family has brought this dilemma on themselves by funding radical Islamists, the U.S. simply cannot abandon its support for the kingdom because more anarchy is the absolute last thing the Middle East needs.

While all these Sunni countries have obvious interests at stake, many fail to realize just how weak countries such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan, whom both heavily rely on U.S. aid to maintain stability, really are. With the price of oil plummeting, a single commodity economy such as Saudi Arabia risks economic ruin without support from the United States. Jordan meanwhile has no discernable natural resources and is nearly completely reliant on U.S. aid for survival. While the Obama administration has continued aiding these countries and has helped prevent these conflicts from spilling over into Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the status quo is not sustainable in the sense that Arab states must reform or risk collapse no matter what the U.S.

does. Therefore, the U.S. must take a more proactive role in encouraging various reforms over the next decade.

This is not to say the United States has been blameless in its history in the Middle East because it is not. However, history has seen the U.S. constructively mitigate conflicts in the Yom Kippur war in 1973, reinstated Kuwait's sovereignty against the Saddam Hussein regime, and up until recently, had contained Iranian ambitions. Thus, we have seen the Saudis lash out and intervene in Yemen to fight against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels that have taken control of large parts of the country. The Turkish government has recently launched deadly offensives against Kurdish groups in their country and risk waging a broader war against the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. While the U.S. deems some Kurdish groups as terror organizations, the Turkish government would directly start a conflict with more moderate groups that the U.S. is continuing to support. In the end, any resolution to ISIS and the wars in Syria and Iraq will require countries to make concessions, an unlikely scenario as of today.

### **The End of American Leadership?**

After laying out the issues and competition of key Middle Eastern states, one can now attempt to formulate a strategy to end these various conflicts. No strategy can be successful unless it addresses all the underlying issues articulated above because the realities on the ground are that the key players will not deviate from their national self-interest. Furthermore, no strategy to defeat ISIS will be successful if it does not address the root of its existence, which is the ongoing sectarian civil war in Syria and Iraq. These conflicts are a symptom of poor governance and a total lack of stable state institutions. In turn, when radical jihadists offer protection for Sunnis and a stable (often hyperbolized) utopian alternative, people will turn to it out of sheer desperation and a total lack of trust in the nation-state system Middle Eastern countries have

attempted to emulate. Due to stubbornness of Turkish and the Gulf state governments, it is additionally unlikely that they will institute much needed domestic reforms as well without receiving any concessions in return.

The first question one must ask is whether the United States is actually prepared to pool meaningful resources into solving these very complex problems. As Pollack argues, “what the United States should certainly not do is refuse to choose between stepping up and stepping back and instead waffle somewhere in the middle, committing enough resources to enlarge its burden without increasing the likelihood that its moves will make anything better” as we have been doing for the past few years (Pollack 2016). This would mean that whoever the next American President is, they must be willing to make the ultimate decision to pull back completely or be prepared to send some number of American ground troops into harms way. If the current frontrunners do in fact secure the nominations of their respective parties, our next president will either be a former Secretary of State who has pledged to continue the failing and half-hearted policies of the current administration or a businessman who somehow managed to bankrupt four casinos and has no discernable foreign policy strategy or experience to speak of. However, on the oft chance the next president is willing to made such a tough decision to intervene or pull back, we will have more clarity of the American position for the future.

Retreating from the Middle East and ridding America of all its obligations would have serious implications contrary to the permeating sentiment out of the American electorate. For instance, the idea that ISIS or any other terror group would not try to attack America or Americans abroad if the U.S. pulls back is pure fantasy. Even as the Obama administration attempted to steer the U.S. away from the Middle East, ISIS taunted the country by beheading American captives live on the Internet. Simply put, attacking America will never go out of style



in the jihadist world no matter what the American policy may be, or lack thereof. In addition, no matter the next president, the U.S. will not realistically abandon supporting Israel or Saudi Arabia, two pariahs in the jihadi world.

Abandoning American commitments would also mean that the U.S. would have no authority to attempt to mediate disputes among various nations or influence much needed domestic reforms. In his 2009 speech at Cairo University, President Obama pledged a new era of American-Egyptian relations that ended with two ousted Egyptian Presidents and a return to the pre-Arab Spring status quo. I saw this firsthand after traveling to Egypt in December 2014 in the form of the military heavily restricting public access to Tahrir Square, the birthplace of the Egyptian protest movement. Arab leaders will simply not enact reforms just because the U.S. tells them to do so if we are not prepared to help meaningfully solve the issues around their borders. As Pollack points out, “the longer that civil wars burn on Saudi Arabia’s northern border, in Iraq, and southern border, in Yemen, the more likely these conflicts will destabilize the kingdom—to say nothing of the possibility of a Jordanian civil war” (Pollack 2015). Thus, it is clearly in the United States short-term immediate interest to have strong leaders who understand these dynamics and to ultimately make the difficult and unpopular decision to step up in the Middle East. However, if we as an international community want to ultimately end the cycles of Middle Eastern violence, domestic reforms must take place in the long-term.

### **End the Civil Wars, Defeat ISIS**

Skeptics of the general idea to step up American involvement are always predictably quick to point out that the U.S. failed in Iraq when we pooled thousands of troops and billions of dollars and that we also failed in our limited air campaign in Libya and thus, America simply cannot win in the Middle East. In response, I would argue that America failed in both these

instances because in Iraq, the U.S. had an unattainable post-Saddam strategy, and in Libya there was no discernable post-Gadhafi strategy to speak of. These skeptics then point to the current situations in Iraq and Syria and argue that foreign powers can never resolve such conflicts with so many competing parties. Though the wars in Syria and Iraq are the most dangerous variety of war due to them being religious and sectarian, intervention is not always doomed from the start, as many profess. According to Pollack, “it is possible for a third party to settle a civil war long before it might end on its own...in about 20 percent of the cases since 1945, and roughly 40 percent of the cases since 1995, an external actor was able to engineer just such an outcome” (Pollack 2016). In the 1990’s for instance, the American-led NATO intervention in Bosnia helped bring to an end to the brutal ethnic war. At the same time, the genocide ultimately took years to stop and NATO troops did not actually withdraw from Bosnia until 2004. This shows the long-term commitment often needed to end such ethnic cycles of violence.

Obviously people would say that 40 percent success rate entails more failures than successes. However, the price of inaction thus far in Syria has led to total catastrophe and the emergence of ISIS. As I have articulated throughout this essay, because ISIS has numerous characteristics of a state, a more conventional warfare approach would garner more success than in past attempts to eradicate terror groups. Because ISIS professes to be a state, its credibility would be greatly hindered if it lost the general territorial sovereignty that the group currently enjoys and constantly shows off through propaganda posts. Taking away their territorial sovereignty would make ISIS in the eyes of potential jihadists, no different than also-rans such as al-Qaeda, which in the current anarchic state of world conflicts, has actually seen an increase in recruitment as well. With that said, simply ridding ISIS of its territory without solving the deepest issues of the region will only produce more offspring’s of ISIS and al-Qaeda.

In order to successfully end a civil war, all sides must believe that they have no hope of outright victory or else they will not meaningfully negotiate a fair settlement. Pollack goes even further and practically points out that negotiations will not help unless “none [warring parties] fears that its fighters will be slaughtered once they lay down their arms” (Pollack 2016). Currently, neither of these preconditions is being met and it has shown through the international community’s latest attempt to orchestrate another temporary ceasefire this past February in Vienna. While it is commendable to attempt such a diplomatic end to a conflict in the spirit of the Congress of Vienna in 1814, the summit only worked because no party had a clear path to obtaining all their objectives without such a settlement. Until such a dynamic of impossible victory is reached, no such conference will have any meaningful effect.

Because the Assad regime, with the help of Russia and Iran, currently holds the upper hand in the conflict, an American strategy must include bringing that alliance down to the same relative strength of the opposition. This means the U.S. must address Syria and Iraq as part of the same overarching issue, meaning that the battlefield dynamics must shift in a more favorable position in both countries. Therefore, any solution must include an actual, internationally composed ground force in both countries. The U.S. and the rest of the world cannot seriously rely on rebel and Kurdish militias to overthrow Assad and take back territory from ISIS because the Kurds will only retake ethnically Kurdish areas and the rebels are simply too weak. Equally important, the U.S. should not rely on Shia militias to retake Sunni territory from ISIS because such militias have a history of carrying out revenge attacks on Sunni civilians. Instead, the international community and other Sunni Arab states must take charge.

While Pollack advocates sending 10,000 American soldiers, it will realistically take much more, roughly 20,000 per country. This is not to say such a ground force should only include

American soldiers because quite simply, it should not and such a composition would prove to be counterproductive. The issues in Syria and Iraq are impacting the whole world, arguably more so in Europe than North America. The rest of the world must understand that simply accommodating refugees will not solve the root of the crisis; it will only lead to a continued exodus from the region. This is not to say that the world should not help refugees, but the international community has avoided solving the crux of the conflict for far too long. A ground force must additionally include NATO, and most importantly, Sunni Arab countries. As recently as mid February, reports surfaced that Saudi Arabia and Turkey had discussed a joint ground invasion of eastern Syria. Because invading Syria entails a two front war against Assad and ISIS, I would propose that the U.S. and NATO primarily deal with deposing Assad while Turkey and Saudi Arabia likewise go after ISIS. This would eliminate the stigma that the U.S. always seeks to repress Sunni Arabs, as the U.S. would instead eliminate Assad, the greatest recruitment tool ISIS possesses.

In Iraq, the U.S. must take a proactive role in helping the Iraqi military retake key cities from ISIS, specifically the country's second largest city, Mosul. A predominantly Sunni city already ethnically cleansed of Shia and minority Christians, the Iraqi military cannot afford to fail in their eventual offensive to retake the city since this may be their last best chance to do so. Likewise, the U.S. cannot afford to allow Shia militias to retake the city, which would risk yet another ethnic cleansing, but towards Sunnis this time. Therefore, the newly trained Iraqi military should be accompanied by U.S. forces and moderate Sunni tribes, which can be accomplished through a power sharing agreement between the government and tribal leaders. Pollack argues that this could be done the same way the U.S. convinced the same Sunni tribes to turn on al-Qaeda from 2007-2009. He writes, "[t]his, in turn, would make it much easier for the

Abadi government [Iraq] and the United States to stand up Sunni military formations to help liberate the Sunni-majority areas of the country from ISIS and help diminish the power of the Iranian-backed Shiite militias” (Pollack 2016). With a Sunni face and newly formed Iraqi military divisions, the U.S. could then dislodge ISIS from Iraq and push them towards the incoming Turkish-Saudi coalition from the west.

While this strategy would territorially defeat ISIS and end the civil wars, many obstacles remain in the way. For instance, the Iraqi Sunni tribes may very well not go along with such a plan due to them fearing being treated in a similar fashion as the Maliki government did immediately after the U.S. withdrawal. In Syria, had the Obama administration initiated the planned no fly zone three years ago, as was internally discussed, the U.S. could have intervened and destroyed Assad’s airpower relatively easily. Now that the international community has allowed Russia to take the lead under the guise of Putin somehow having the capacity to be an ‘honest broker’, it will be extremely difficult to target Assad without coming into conflict with Russian military installations. The Russians would also be completely unreceptive to an open-ended NATO, Turkish, and Saudi invasion since their national interests would be perceived to be at risk. Because the dangers would run deep that such an incident would provoke a significant escalation of hostilities, the Russians must become convinced to abandon Assad. There are two possible ways to broker such a deal: First, The U.S. and Russia, under the agreement that a replacement for Assad must come from within his regime, select a replacement that would appeal to both the Russians and the opposition. The second and more likely solution would be a partition of not only Syria, but Iraq as well. This is admittedly a completely undemocratic practice and harkens back to imperialist times, but the simple fact is that Russia has become far

too involved in Syria at this point to realistically expect them to go along with any American sponsored plan without any concessions on the part of the U.S. and Syrian opposition.

### **The Case for New States**

Usually, partitions are a last ditch effort and are only done if a country has irreconcilable differences with each other. After over five years of civil war in Syria and over a decade of sectarian unrest in Iraq, a partition would both be best for the long-term and could more likely appease each side of the conflict. According to Khedery, “it is now evident that Shiite Islamists will not accept secular-nationalist rule by Sunnis or Shiites and that neither camp will accept rule by Sunni Islamists, especially the radical version espoused by the Islamic State. The relatively secular Kurds, meanwhile, are unwilling to live under Arab rule of any sort” (Khedery 2015). The main issue is simply that too much religious and ethnic tension exists to expect Syrians and Iraqis to reconcile their differences and rebuild countries that they never felt fully apart of in the first place. Only thanks to strongman dictators have these countries survived up until this point and not due to any other unifying principle. Even in 1932, this fact was apparent to Faisal bin al-Husseini, the first monarch of Iraq. He surmised:

With my heart filled with sadness, I have to say that it is my belief that there is no Iraqi people inside Iraq. There are only diverse groups with no national sentiments. They are filled with superstitious and false religious traditions with no common grounds between them. They easily accept rumors and are prone to chaos, prepared always to revolt against any government (Khedery 2015).

To sum, because there is no real history of Iraqi unity, it is impractical to believe that after over a decade of sectarian civil war that Iraqis would suddenly united with one another and bury their differences. Besides, the Iraqi government has failed time and time again to provide Iraqis with the tools necessary to better their lives. Though in 2010 he denied ever calling for a partition, Vice President Joe Biden deserves credit for writing in a 2006 *New York Times* opinion piece calling for just that. He wrote, “[s]ome will say moving toward strong regionalism would

ignite sectarian cleansing. But that's exactly what is going on already, in ever-bigger waves...Others will argue that it would lead to partition. But a breakup is already underway. As it was in Bosnia, a strong federal system is a viable means to prevent both perils in Iraq" (Biden and Gelb 2006). However, due to participation by states such as Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, a partition of Iraq and Syria will likely not turn out as cleanly as one would desire.

The Russian-Iranian-Alawite alliance could be likely only be appeased by allowing the remnants of the regime to control western Syria, including Damascus, Homs, and the coastal cities of Latakia and Tartus, which are home to numerous Russian military installations. This will give Russia assurance that its key interests will not be tampered with while will alleviating supporters of the regime's concerns, specifically minority Alawites, that a Sunni controlled state would repress them as retribution for the war. Likewise, the Sunni opposition will be given the rest of the country, which includes the cities of Aleppo, Hama, and Raqqa, the proclaimed capital of ISIS. In Iraq, the Sunnis would receive Anbar province and all territory up to Mosul and as east as Ramadi. The Kurds will gain full independence of Kurdistan and small amounts of land in northeastern Syria while the current Shia Iraqi government will keep the rest of the country.

While such an ambitious state building project will take decades to fully complete, strengthening and reforming state institutions is the most important aspect of ridding the world of groups such as ISIS. If Europe and Asia could be rebuilt after the ruinous world wars, then Syrian and Iraqi infrastructure can be rebuilt as well. Instead of leaving Sunnis nowhere to turn but ISIS, they would now be able to live in a Sunni dominated state without worrying about repression from Assad or the Iraqi central government. With joint U.N., American, and Arab assistance, these new states could decide for themselves their new form of government as reconstruction commences. The newly independent Kurdistan and Turkey must formally agree to

respect each other's sovereignty with the help of U.N peacekeepers. These peacekeepers will also assist humanitarian aid groups with resettling the millions of refugees in the region, who will be able to choose for themselves on a reconstructed country to live. Finally, the citizens must have the real opportunity to economically better themselves not just in these reconstructed countries, but also throughout the Middle East. Therefore, Arab states must agree to many of the reforms popularly advocated during the Arab Spring to prevent another total lack of confidence in the state system that allowed ISIS to flourish in the first place.

A strategy to defeat ISIS will fail unless one understands what ISIS actually is and why it has been able to flourish with such success. ISIS is a group that has sought to exploit the many shortcomings of the modern Arab nation-state and instead preaches an unsustainable and arcane existence under the guise of better governance for repressed Sunnis. To legitimize such a claim, ISIS does in fact possess territorial sovereignty, administers a competent level of governance in numerous instances, and shields Sunnis from a barbarous Assad regime and brutal Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq. Therefore, ISIS cannot possibly be defeated without addressing the situations in both countries. The first step to reversing such a situation would be to militarily defeat both ISIS and Assad so that the international community could then mediate and facilitate a partition along sectarian lines. Then, much needed reconstruction and reforms could be enacted while leaving each group to decide how they want to govern themselves. It would be naïve to not acknowledge that such a strategy may still fail to prevent ISIS or some incarnation of it from rising again, but we must try to change the way Arab nation-states operate. ISIS was the radical jihadists alternative and it is now time for supporters of the nation-state to present the Arab world with a new and more acceptable alternative.



## Conclusion

The rise of ISIS against the backdrop of the dying embers of the Arab Spring paints a particularly distressing picture of the Middle East and the general health of the modern nation-state. In far too many places in the region, average peoples lives have not improved and instead grown increasingly frustrated with rampant corruption and ineffective governance on the part of Arab states. Likewise, ISIS has taken advantage of the fractured countries of Syria and Iraq and has carved out a state of their own with the hope of expanding into a medieval style caliphate. As a result, millions of people have been caught in the middle and have been forced to live under ISIS as their only way to survive. Due to this dynamic, one must assess just how close ISIS has come to achieving all the basic functions of a state. Furthermore, this begs the question of what exactly constitutes a modern nation-state.

To answer this question, I first studied numerous theorists and their conception of the modern state beginning with the Peace of Westphalia, which laid the groundwork for the international state system we have today. It is with this basic understanding of a state that I then examined the work of Hobbes and cited the writings of Lawrence Oppenheimer and Alexander Wendt, among others. After assessing their works, it became abundantly clear that in order to be considered a state, such an entity must have territorial sovereignty, legitimacy, and international recognition. In the case of ISIS, its territorial sovereignty is one of the group's most significant assets and is a key difference when comparing ISIS to other global terror groups.

There is a wealth of evidence supporting the notion that ISIS is in fact much more complex and dangerous than other groups such as al-Qaeda. As I showed, ISIS has shown the ability to carry out basic governing functions that the Syrian and Iraqi governments failed to do in the past. This has legitimized ISIS in the eyes of many locals who have sought basic

governmental stability for decades. Therefore, it is imperative that a secular Sunni group emerges from the civil wars, considering ISIS is currently the only semblance of a Sunni territory in the mayhem of Iraq and Syria. Thus, moderate Sunnis that could then truly unite their people must replace ISIS.

Thanks to oil, extortion, black market trade, and bank takeovers, ISIS does not have to worry about a lack of funding for the foreseeable future. This includes numerous weapon arsenals of the Syrian and Iraqi military and even chemical weapon stockpiles stolen from the Assad regime. No matter how many airstrikes are called in, ISIS will only continue to produce such weapons and explosive devices and even attempt to export them around the world. ISIS continues to use its territory as propaganda online and attract foreign youth on the idea of building a utopian society. While I examine how ISIS uses the Internet to further its ambition, much more can be researched and written on potential measures to prevent ISIS from using the Internet for evil as the group is doing. This has only reinforced the notion that their territory is one of their greatest assets.

Because of this, I strongly advocate a solution that must take away the territorial sovereignty ISIS has been able to attain over the course of the past few years. While I believe the strategy outlined is the best solution to defeat ISIS and end the civil wars, it is certainly not foolproof by any means. I could even concede that it is very unlikely for events to go as smoothly as I outlined, but the fact of the matter is not intervening has produced the worst possible results thus far. Furthermore, the strategy of containment and hoping ISIS will eventually run out of food, water, money, and weapons is also condemning the millions essentially held captive in its territory the same fate. ISIS has not allowed any foreign aid into its areas and there is no evidence of that changing anytime soon. As long as the group continues to

go unhindered in its territory, the world should expect more terror attacks on the scale of Paris or worse. If the world has learned anything from ISIS and the civil wars, it is that it has the potential to further spiral out of control and bring down the rest of the region with it, which cannot be allowed to happen.

Many would also criticize my strategy of relying on soldiers from Turkey and Saudi Arabia because both countries domestic and regional policies have helped fuel sectarianism and radical Islam. I do not disagree with such a notion, but the fact of the matter is that the international community has no choice but to continue to stand by these governments in the short-term. The last possible outcome the world needs is yet more failing states in a region with civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. However, it is imperative that neighboring states and U.S. allies in the region understand that in order to move forward with stable states, governments must reform the way they conduct themselves from the top down. I typically do not believe that the U.S. can simply force countries to change their ways, but after initiating my strategy, I would advocate tying U.S. funding towards whether states actually initiate domestic reforms. Whether people realize it or not, there is a fundamental ideological battle happening in many of these countries surrounding the pros and cons of the modern nation-state in the Middle East. Too often, Middle Eastern governments conduct corrupt practices that ultimately hurt average citizens. Further research would have to be done on the specific nature of U.S. funding towards Middle Eastern states to address which areas the U.S. could realistically withhold future funding, but such an option should at least be on the table.

To close, it is very possible that a year from now or even sooner, the world will have to wrestle with a territorially expanding ISIS in Libya. Since the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has fractured among competing expansion governments and tribal leaders.

Predictably, ISIS has established a presence that is now estimated to be in the thousands and has even staged mass execution videos that they are renowned for. To further complicate matters, Libya has become a migrant hub dominated by vast criminal networks that are often tied to terror groups, particularly ISIS. As a result, ISIS may very well be making a sustainable income trafficking desperate migrants to Europe and is well positioned to imbed operatives amongst them to their advantage, let alone from the vast oil wealth Libya possesses. This is not to say Europe should not continue to take refugees, because they and the United States contrary to some, has an obligation to do so. While much more research needs to be dedicated towards crafting a policy to end the chaos in Libya, I believe Europe must take the lead since it has far more at stake with Libya being mere miles from the Italian and European coast.

This essay was meant to be an informational overview of what ISIS actually is and the implications that come with their actions and claims. Hopefully now more people can understand that ISIS is not simply plotting domestic and foreign attacks on unsuspecting civilians as al-Qaeda and many other groups have done in the past. ISIS is instead trying to erect a new society out of the failing states in the Middle East and is using locals fears and desperation to their advantage. There is immense blame to go around as I have shown. No matter ones party politics, the overall sad reality is that there is very little chance that the U.S., international community, and most importantly, the Middle Eastern states, will evolve and adapt to the current danger and enact policies that not only ends the chaos, but allows the Middle East to start a new, more promising chapter in its rich history.

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