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Islamic State, Syria's Civil War and the Reshaping of the Middle East

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Defence and Security Studies

at Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand

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2017

Abstract

The Islamic State grew out of the ashes of a defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq. The continued conflicts in Iraq and Syria have provided the catalyst for a resurgent Islamic State. Syria's civil war has allowed the Islamic State to remerge like a terrorist phoenix, reborn from its own ashes. This thesis analyses the origins of the Islamic State, and the geo-political conditions and on-going conflicts in Iraq and Syria which have permitted the growth and expansion of the Islamic State. It also analyses how the fight against the Islamic State is changing the security environment within the Middle East.

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

W.B. Yeats.
The Second Coming.¹

¹ William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," Poetry Foundation,
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming>.

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Acronyms

AQ - Al-Qaeda

AQAP - al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

AQIM - al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

AQI - al-Qaeda in Iraq

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

CPA - Coalition Provisional Authority

EU - European Union

FSM - Free Syrian Army

HSM - Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen more commonly known as al-Shabaab

HTS - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Assembly for Liberation of the Levant)

ICU - Islamic Courts Union

IS - Islamic State

ISI - Islamic State in Iraq

ISIS - Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

JaN - Jabhat al-Nusra

JTS - Jabhat Fatah al-Sham

KNC - Kurdish National Council

KRG - Kurdish Regional

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NGO - Non-Government Organisation

YPG - Yekineyen Parastina Gel - People's Defence Units

PKK - Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan - Kurdish Workers Party

PLO - Palestine Liberation Organisation

PMU - Popular Mobilisation Units

PYD - Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat - Democratic Union Party

SOFA - Status of Forces Agreement

SNC - Syrian National Coalition

SNF - Syrian Nationalist Front

TTP - Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

TFG - Transitional Federal Government

UN – United Nations

UNSCR - UN Security Council Resolution

UNSC - United Nations Security Council

US – United States

SEAL - US Navy Sea Air and Land Teams

VBIED - Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device

WMD - Weapons of Mass Destruction

Introduction

The Islamic State (*ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah*) is a symptom of those Sunnis marginalised by the structural inequalities created by the current conflicts within Iraq and Syria. Because the central authorities of Iraq and Syria cannot provide political, social and economic security to the marginalised, they then turn to the extremes for security. This is the principle reason that extremist groups such as the *Taliban* (from the Pashto word for students, *al-Qaeda* (Arabic for the Foundation or the Base), *Jabhat al-Nusra* (full name Victory Front for the People of the Levant by the Mujahideen of the Levant on the Fields of Jihad. Arabic *Jabhat an-Nuṣrah li-ahli ash-Shām min Mujahideen ash-Shām fi Sahat al-Jihad*) and Islamic State have been able to establish themselves. The Islamic State is a new paradigm that has proven to be more brutal and more sectarian than the groups that preceded it.² Although relentless and brutal in its behaviours, the Islamic State has predicated part of its propaganda on offering security and stability, purporting to provide alternative governance in the face of state weakness. For marginalised and disgruntled Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, although they may not share its ideology, the Islamic State's sectarian violence provides a vehicle by which to exercise their grievances, and the means to reclaim political power. The Islamic State has fomented and grown on the back of sectarian violence. As a group, it has used the civil wars and ongoing unrest in the region, firstly in Iraq and then in Syria, to establish itself and to spread across the Middle East.

² Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *Isis: The State of Terror*, 1st ed. (London: William Collins, 2015), 235.

Although the Islamic State has its origins in the Iraqi conflict and is a product of the American invasion, the ineptitude of the US governance of Iraq, the sectarian agenda of the al-Maliki government and the fanatical desires of an obscure Jordanian national. Despite this, the group was almost defunct until the disintegration of Syria reignites the jihadist flames. The heavy-handed repression of the Syrian protests that broke out in 2011, by the regime of Bashar al-Assad enable the jihadists to regroup on the new battlefield. Syria's porous borders and the blinkered approach of Syria's neighbours allowed an increasing influx of foreign fighters into Syria. It was these conditions that bolstered the numbers of Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), who rejuvenated would reinvent itself as Islamic State and go on to surge back into Iraq, seize Mosul and declare its Caliphate.

Both Iraq and Syria have a shared history of authoritarianism and repression under their respective Ba'athist regimes. Ba'athism (Arabic *al-Ba'athiyah* meaning renaissance or resurrection) was a Arab nationalist ideology. The concept of 3 Syrian intellectuals, Michel Aflaq, Zaki al-Arsuzi and Salah al-Din al-Bitar. It was based on the principles of Arab nationalism, it supported one party states and rejected political pluralism. Although Ba'athism promoted socialist economics and modernisation, it would become a byword for state repression and authoritarianism. Syria would pursue a ruthless form of Arab secular nationalism that utilised the machinery of state to encourage a culture of absolutes and intolerance.³ In this environment non-arabs were repressed and Islamist movements were manipulated to achieve regime goals.⁴ Saddam Hussein would in the 1990s use militant Islam as a prop for his regime. Bashar al-Assad

³ William Harris, *Quicksilver War: Syria, Iraq and the Spiral of Conflict*, 1st ed. (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 5.

⁴ Ibid.

would later turn jihadists loose on his own citizenry as justification for the continued repression of his regime and in a misguided attempt to align Syria with the West's fight against Salafist-jihadist terror.

Although frequently addressed in black and white terms, particularly in parts of Western and Arab media, the conflicts in Syria and Iraq are anything but, neither is each conflict separate from the other, both conflicts have at various points driven and fed the other. In many respects the conflict zones of Iraq and Syrian represent a single fluid field of conflict, in which the participants represent a multi-layered stratum of competing elements. These are represented by the Syrian regime, the Iraqi government, the various rebel factions such as the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). At the regional level are attempts by the Syrian and Iraqi governments to exploit aspects of the conflicts for their own ends. Additionally, the Iraqi-Syrian battlefield represents an opportunity for the regional powerhouses of Saudi Arabia and Iran to achieve their political aims within the region. Each supporting differing factions as both struggle to pronounce themselves as a regional hegemon. The Iraqi-Syrian conflict zone has also drawn in global players such as the United States and Russia.⁵ The United States plays a central role in the origins of the conflict through its role in the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein, and in the chaos inflicted on Iraq in the aftermath. The ineptitude of the American administration of Iraq post-Hussein, particularly the process of De-Ba'athification, was a significant contributor to all that followed. Russia has viewed the conflict as an opportunity to build upon its relationship with the Syrian regime, to re-establish itself as a major power and to act as

⁵ Eduardo Wassim Aboultaif, "Regional and International Factors That Prolong the Syrian Crisis," *Syria Studies* 8, no. 2 (2016): 5.

a spoiler to American ambitions.⁶ Within the conflict non-state actors, such as Islamic State, *Jabhat al-Nusra* and the Kurds, have attempted to create their own alternatives to state rule. Each has used to conflict to pursue their own extra-territorial agendas, the Islamic State with its pretensions to a neo-Caliphate and the Kurds as they attempt to push autonomy into independence. Turkey's position is complicated by its opposition to Kurdish independence, whilst protecting itself against the jihadists and pursuing a strategic aim of self-determination for the Syrian Sunnis.⁷ Amongst the Arab states there is considerable division. Abu Dhabi is fearful of the Islamist surge across the region. However, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar see the conflict as an opportunity to dispose the regions nationalists. The West is torn between the desire to pursue its strategic and, to a lesser extent, humanitarian goals, whilst not wishing to become further bogged in another military commitment.⁸

Because of the above factors the various actors, state and non-state, within the Iraqi-Syrian conflict zone are laying the foundations for the reshaping of the Middle East and for the conflicts of tomorrow. Salafist-jihadists thrive on the civil wars within the Muslim world. These conflicts shape their narrative and draws recruits to them. The conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya and Somalia to name a few examples, have given birth to new terror groups and have strengthened existing ones. The Iraqi-Syrian conflict zone has acted as a major recruiting tool for the Salafist-jihadists attracting large numbers of foreign and local recruits. This in turn has had an impact both locally and externally, for example the increase in Salafist-jihadist inspired attacks in Europe.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dr Andres Kreig, "Surrogate War and the Illusion of State-Centrism," <https://defenceindepth.co/2016/12/12/surrogate-war-and-the-illusion-of-state-centrism/>.

⁸ Ibid.

Terror groups such as Islamic State have taken advantage of the voids left by the absence of the state to seize territory and present themselves as a viable alternative. Although at the time of writing the Islamic State appears of being on the verge of defeat. The risk is that the continued conflict within the region will permit it to resurrect itself again or for another to fill the space it has left behind. The continuance of the conflict also runs a risk of direct conflict between the regional powers and that of the United States and Russia.

Research Objective, Organisation and Methodology

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the rise of the Islamic State, from its origins as *al-Qaeda's* affiliate in Iraq to mid-2017 where it appears to be on the cusp of defeat. This thesis will do so by examining those factors which have contributed to the rise of the Islamic State. The thesis examines the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, with the primary focus being on the Syrian civil war. It also examines the split between *al-Qaeda* and the Islamic State. By breaking with the dictates of *al-Qaeda's* central command Islamic State in Iraq and later Islamic State, were free to pursue their goal of seizing territory and establishing a Caliphate. The later part of the thesis examines the impact of the internationalisation of the Syrian conflict and how in the absence of the state, non-state actors have attempted to establish alternative forms of governance. The actions of the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran, have done much to directly and indirectly aid in the rise of Islamic State. Rather than examine a single aspect of the rise of the Islamic State, this thesis takes a more holistic and strategic overview of the rise of the Islamic State. It does so in order to provide context to the rise of Islamic State through examining the structural and contingent socio-political and geo-political aspects that have contributed to the Islamic State's existence. It aims to demonstrate that Islamic State is a contemporary phenomenon; a product of the conditions within the region.

There are limitations to any study of the Islamic State and the conflicts that have given rise to it. Firstly, is that the situation in Iraq whilst stabilising is still unsettled and the civil war in Syria is an ongoing and highly dynamic situation. It is difficult to draw

firm conclusions from a constantly changing landscape. Secondly, local reporting from within Iraq, Syria and the wider can be subject to the biases of the author and their personal affiliations. Local media reporting is also subject to the political outlook of their respective patrons. Secondly, in comparison to *al-Qaeda*, there is a lack of primary source material on Islamic State. By its very nature and that of the conflict in Syria, the group has not encouraged study by outsiders. Very few have taken the risky step of seeing and conducting first hand reporting of the Islamic State. Those that have sallied forth such as the German reporter Jurgen Todenhofer, have been subject to restrictions and consequently have only witnessed what they have been permitted to see.⁹ Consequently, this thesis draws primarily upon secondary sources written by academics, journalists and other subject matter experts.

Chapter 1 is an examination of the current literature on Islamic State and traces the underlining factors that gave rise to the group. Chapter 2 focuses on Islamic State's early development as a product of the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent insurgencies. It examines some of the key geo-political factors that led to the rise of Islamic State. It argues the security environment in post-invasion Iraq laid the foundations for the rise of Islamic State. Chapter 3 examines the split between Islamic State and its parent, *al-Qaeda*. It examines some of the ideological differences between Islamic State and *al-Qaeda*. It does so through an examination of Islamic State and its Salafist-jihadist rival in Syria, *al-Nusra*. It argues that the split with *al-Qaeda* was a critical development in the expansion of the Islamic State. Chapter 4 traces the development of the Syrian Civil War. It provides an analysis of how the actions of the

⁹ Ahmed S. Hashim, *The Caliphate at War: The Ideological, Organisational and Military Innovations of Islamic State*, 1st ed. (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 15.

Syrian government allowed the Salafist-jihadists to grow and become a dominant force within the conflict. Chapter 5 examines the impact of both international and regional actors, on the Syrian conflict. It examines how the actions of external actors in the Syrian conflict have created the conditions which have both allowed the growth of Salafist-jihadists and have prevented effective action against such groups. Chapter 6 examines how the region is becoming fragmented, and examines using the Kurds, *al-Nusra* and Islamic State as examples, how alternative forms of governance are being shaped and applied within the region. Chapter 7 summarises the thesis and draws conclusions as to how the conflicts are shaping the region, and what the future of the region may be.

Literature Review

The Islamic State is a symptom. It is not the disease. It does not, and has not, posed an “existential threat” to anyone, beyond those in its immediate geographical environment. The term existential threat has become so over used that much like the phrase “Global War on Terror”, it has lost all meaning.¹⁰ But for those in Iraq and Syria, that have found themselves under the control of Islamic State, it is an all too real prospect. Islamic State, and its predecessors have unleashed a wave of violence and ethnic cleansing across the two states. Furthermore the rise of Islamic State has directly threatened the existence of both the Iraqi and Syrian states, and has indirectly threatened the security of many other states within the Middle East and North Africa.¹¹ For those living within Iraq and Syria, Islamic State does pose an existential threat at both the individual and community level. As Patrick Cockburn observed: “Iraq and Syria moved closer to disintegration as their diverse communities – Shia, Sunni, Kurds, Alawites, and Christians, found they were fighting for their very existence.”¹² The Islamic State and others of its ilk, originates, exists and grows, in the shadow of civil conflict formed from weak or failed states.¹³ As Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger note recruits to Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and later Islamic State were often not motivated by ideology, but because it represented a rallying force against regimes that had failed them.¹⁴ Paul Rogers argues that groups such as Islamic State represent a “revolt from

¹⁰ Patrick Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 1st ed. (London: Verso, 2016), 434.

¹¹ Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, "Was the Rise of Isis Inevitable?," *Survival* 59, no. 3 (2017).

¹² Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of the Islamic State: Isis and the New Sunni Revolution*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2015), xi.

¹³ Barak Mendelson, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 98-99.

¹⁴ Stern and Berger, 223.

the margins”.¹⁵ He argues that economic marginalisation and the effects of climate change, such as the 2011 Syrian draught that occurred prior to the revolution, are the fundamental drivers of conflict.¹⁶ Rogers further states that increasing literacy and education is making people far more aware of their marginalisation. Additionally, he argues that the West’s reliance on military force is a key factor in exacerbating conflicts such as Iraq and Syria.¹⁷ Citing the example of the 9/11 attacks and *al-Qaeda*, Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall state that post 9/11, terrorism and groups such as *al-Qaeda* were treated as existential threats to the United States and Western values.¹⁸ They further expand on this stating that both sides drew the wrong conclusions from the attacks. The Bush administration was mistaken in the belief that the attacks were indicative of *al-Qaeda*’s capability, and were repeatable.¹⁹ Hal Brands and Peter Feaver argue that the emergence of the Islamic State was not inevitable but can in part be attributed to the decision to invade Iraq in 2003.²⁰ It is their contention that the 2003 either “unleashed or exacerbated many of the forces that drove ISIS’s ascendancy”.²¹ *Al-Qaeda* saw the American over-reaction as being indicative of America’s weakness and impending defeat.²² These same errors are being repeated in Iraq and Syria. The reality is that neither side has been defeated nor has either achieved victory. Hamid and Farrall state that by relying on the use of military power to defeat Salafist-jihadist groups like *al-Qaeda* and the Islamic State, it weakens all involved in the conflict. If in thinking that power and force will solve the issue: “...it brings more weakness for the

¹⁵ Paul Rogers, *Irregular War: Isis and the New Threat from the Margins*, 1st ed. (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016), 5.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan*, 1st ed. (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 308.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Brands and Feaver.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hamid and Farrall, 308.

user of power, and more weakness to those who respond to the user of power.

Depending on power and power from the gun only means that eventually you will lose your position".²³ Military force alone cannot defeat violent non-state actors; groups like Islamic State thrive in an environment of weak governance and perpetual conflict.

Treating terrorist attacks as an act of war, and groups such as *al-Qaeda* and the Islamic State as existential threats. Only provides further oxygen to such groups, and endows them with a political legitimacy they otherwise may not have had.²⁴ Likewise, the rise of Salafist-jihadist groups, such as *al-Qaeda* and the Islamic State, has led to a rigidity of thought, and in the militarisation of *jihad* (meaning striving or struggling, a complex term in Islam which has both spiritual and military connotations).²⁵ This has also come about, in part, because of "the unspoken elephant in the room", the support structure offered to the Salafist-jihadist groups from financiers in the Gulf States.²⁶ This militarisation of *jihad* has meant that it has been reduced to acts of violence, often without restraint or responsibility, for the private purposes of the financiers.²⁷ In a similar fashion, regional and international powers have sought to harness proxies to carry out their agendas within conflict zones. Sami Moubayed points out that many are blamed for the rise of Islamic State in the complex geo-political dynamics of the Middle East, both regionally and internationally.²⁸ The use of proxies by regional and international powers, the rise in the use of special forces by the US, Russia and Iran, and proliferation of non-state actors such as militias like the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation

²³ Ibid., 309.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 310.

²⁶ Ibid., 311.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Sami Moubayed, *Under the Black Flag: An Exclusive Insight into the Inner Workings of Isis*, 1st ed. (London: I.B.Tauris, 2015), 209.

Units (PMUs), has reduced the transparency of how these conflicts are being waged at both the tactical and strategic levels.²⁹ The Iraqi-Syrian battlespace is particularly marked by the extensive use of proxies as surrogate actors on the battlefield. Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia fund and support armed rebel factions within Syria, Russia has supported the al-Assad regime with its own non-state actors.³⁰ The US support of its proxy in the form of the Kurds, adds an additional layer of complexity. By using the Kurds as its proxy, the US not only risks alienating its Sunni allies within the region but of also changing the regional security dynamics in unforeseen ways (the US support for Afghan Mujahedeen is a primary example of the law of unintended consequences).³¹ Paul Rogers echoes this stating that the secrecy surrounding the use of special forces allows state actors to claim there are no “boots on the ground”.³² As a result, there is increasing concern that international and regional powers, such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, Russia and Iran, are taking steps to be unaccountable for their actions and are conducting operations beyond the scope of international law.³³ For instance, the reliance of the US on drone strikes to carry out extra-judicial killings, especially against its own citizens overseas, such as Anwar al-Awlaki.³⁴ A further example is the use of chemical weapons by the al-Assad regime in violation of international conventions.³⁵ As Andrew Mumford points out the idea of “plausible deniability” and the lower direct risks associated with proxy warfare as made it an attractive concept to states seeking to defend or expand their interests.³⁶ Although the use of proxies offers advantages in

²⁹ Hamid and Farrall, 311.

³⁰ Alex Marshall, "From Civil War to Proxy War: Past History and Current Dilemmas," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2 (2016).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Rogers, 162.

³³ Hamid and Farrall, 311.

³⁴ Scott Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, a President, and the Rise of the Drone*, 1st ed. (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015), 220-21.

³⁵ Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen, "Syria Chemical Weapons Attack Toll Rises to 70 as Russian Narrative Is Dismissed " *The Guardian*.

³⁶ Andrew Mumford, "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict," *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 2 (2013).

bypassing the potential public backlash of directly committing military forces to conflicts in which the legitimacy of intervention is in question. The use of proxies runs the risk of exacerbating and prolonging conflict through the injection of external funding, weapons and personnel.³⁷

Nicolas Henin, journalist and a former hostage of the Islamic State, suggests that the rise of the Islamic State can be attributed to a complex mix of: “discrimination, marginalisation and sectarianism”.³⁸ In Iraq and Syria, the breakdown of these states, along with the associated violence and deprivation, have created the conditions in which violent non state actors can thrive.³⁹ Barak Mendelson echoes this idea in his study of the expansion of *al-Qaeda*.⁴⁰ Mendelson attributes the growth of Salafist-jihadist groups, to the weakening of states ability to enforce laws and provide border security. He argues that weak states are less able to secure their borders and prevent such organisations from carving out safe havens for training and launching operations.⁴¹ He suggests state weakness frequently manifests in an inability to provide basic services for its citizens; well-resourced groups, such as the Islamic State, can present themselves as an alternative.⁴² Shiraz Maher points to the Islamic State as being what he describes as “violent rejectionists”.⁴³ Maher argues that such groups present themselves as an alternative to the current modern state:

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Nicolas Henin, *Jihad Academy: The Rise of the Islamic State*, 1st ed. (India: Bloomsbury, 2015), xiii.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Mendelson, 98.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 99.

⁴³ Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, 1st ed. (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 11.

violent-rejectionists are irreconcilably estranged from the state, regarding it as a heretical and artificial unit. The entire notion of the modern nation-state is a heterodox affront to Islam whereby temporal legislation usurps God's sovereignty. The system therefore needs radical overhaul and reordering while its agents must be confronted.⁴⁴

By offering some alternative, insurgent groups can attract recruits and supporters, whilst consolidating and expanding, their hold on territory and populace.⁴⁵ Moubayed continues this theme arguing that the situations in Iraq and Syria provided fertile ground in which the Islamic State could grow.⁴⁶ He argues that the situation, such as government repression, competing sectarian factions and the breakdown of law and order within Syria and Iraq, created an environment that was ready to accept a group such as Islamic State, that the population had grown weary of the old regime and "were desperate for a break with the past."⁴⁷ Fawaz A. Gerges adds to this, arguing that the reliance on tyranny, corruption and coercion by governments across the region, led to a breakdown of the state-society relationship.⁴⁸ He further states that whilst Islamic State presents a threat to regional security, its ability to do so is due to the weakness of the Arab states, rather than Islamic State's strength as a strategic actor.⁴⁹ Moubayed states that the bulk of those that joined the Salafist-jihadists frequently have done so, not necessarily out of a shared belief but because the previous political systems had failed them.⁵⁰ Islamic State offered an alternative, it laid claim to the provision of public

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Mendelson, 99.

⁴⁶ Moubayed, 209.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Fawaz A Gerges, *Isis: A History*, 1st ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁰ Moubayed, 210.

goods such as law enforcement, health care and education, but most of all a return to the glories of the past; the reconstruction of a Sunni Caliphate.

Prior to the death of bin Laden, *al-Qaeda* was seen as the leading alternative for Salafist-jihadists, however, it has been surpassed by Islamic State, whose rejection of the international system and constitutional politics, has seen the enactment of policies that defy civilizational standards.⁵¹ Richard Sokolsky and Perry Cammack state that: “History has shown that the longer localized Middle East conflicts fester the more likely they are to metastasize into geopolitical contests which empower and embolden the most radical actors.”⁵² The current conflict and unrest in Syria and Iraq, cannot and will not be resolved by the defeat of the Islamic State. By concentrating efforts on the defeat of the Islamic State, we marginalise the other larger geo-political conflicts that feed the growth of the Islamic State. The defeat of the Islamic State requires the acknowledgement of the complex conditions that allow such groups to take root.⁵³ As Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle point out that Islamic State has emerged in a time of political turmoil across the Middle East.⁵⁴ As people struggled to meet their basic needs, Islamic State promised food, shelter and security.⁵⁵ Additionally, the turmoil felt across the region opened long standing cleavages across the region.⁵⁶ Political actors, both state and non-state, seized upon this climate of fear of the other to securitise sectarian division to achieve power and dominance. A primary example of this would be the

⁵¹ Maher, 11.

⁵² Perry Cammack and Richard Sokolsky, "Doubling Down on America's Misadventure in Yemen," War on the Rocks, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/doubling-down-on-americas-misadventure-in-yemen/>.

⁵³ Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle, *The Origins of Isis: The Collapse of Nations and Revolutions in the Middle East*, 1st ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 4.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

actions of the al-Maliki government in Iraq, which demonstrated a willingness to exploit sectarian tensions for its own political advantage.

Islamic State has built strategic alliances with Islamists, tribes and military staff such as former commanders from Saddam's army, whose knowledge of irregular warfare and Iraq would be valuable to the groups expansion. Whilst many of these alliances are marriages of convenience entered to ensure a group or tribe's survival.⁵⁷ The extent to which Islamic State has embedded itself in the region presents long term challenges. As Mabon and Royle state: "Given how embedded the group is within the political, economic, social, and religious landscapes of Syria and Iraq, defeating the group – and Sunni militancy generally – will be difficult."⁵⁸ Furthermore, any analysis of Islamic State must be grounded in the realities of the geo-political environment that gave rise to it. Islamic State is a contemporary phenomenon and a product of the current Middle Eastern security environment. It is necessary to ground any analysis of the group within the environment in which it exists and operates.⁵⁹

Peter R. Neumann argues that Salafist- jihadist groups represent a movement.⁶⁰ Neumann states that: "...organizations such as *al-Qaeda* and Islamic State have only been the manifestations of a wider social, political and religious movement."⁶¹ Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami argue that the growth of Salafism, a puritanical form Islam that seeks a return to the ways of the first Muslims, is due to the projection of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 7-8.

⁶⁰ Peter R Neuman, *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West*, 2nd ed. (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016), xvii.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Wahhabism by Saudi Arabia.⁶² But as Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami further state this does not fully explain the expansion of Salafism. Because Salafism has a literal rather than mystical tone it appeals to modernising populations, whilst its millenarian political vision offers solace to the oppressed or alienated.⁶³ For the marginalised Sunni populations in Iraq and Syria, the Salafist ideology espoused by the Salafist-jihadist groups such as Islamic State, had great initial appeal. The 2003 invasion of Iraq reshaped that country's political and economic environment. Marginalised segments of Iraq's society found themselves holding the reins of power, and the powerful found themselves on the fringe. Sectarian violence became the weapon of choice as each sought to retain or regain their status. In Syria, the hope for democratic freedom and improved economic conditions were crushed under the counter-revolutionary reactions of the deep-state. The initial hope that Bashar al-Assad - young and western educated - may have ushered in a new era of prosperity, was crushed when al-Assad and the Syrian security apparatus turned upon the protestors.

Syria and Iraq have become the battlefields for local and international actors, as each attempt to gain tactical or strategic advantage over others. A key risk in the fight against Islamic State is that by focusing exclusively on one group we marginalise the potential future regional security threats from the rise of other violent non-state actors in the region. Furthermore, is the risk of overlooking the fallout from the proxy wars of regional powers.⁶⁴ Iran and *Hezbollah* (Party of Allah/God) believe their partnership's survival is at stake.⁶⁵ For the Gulf States, the conflict is about containing Iran's growing

⁶² Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 1st ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 119.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Henin, xiv.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

influence within the region, and for Saudi Arabia, maintaining its primacy as an ally of the West.⁶⁶ Turkey seeks to re-establish itself as a regional power, whilst simultaneously attempting to curtail and contain Kurdish hopes for independence.⁶⁷ The roots of the Islamic State lie in Iraq and it is in Iraq that we can examine how Islamic State came to be and how regional and international actors, state and non-state, created the conditions for the Islamic States rise and expansion.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Iraq: A Butterfly Flaps its Wings

Although the Syrian conflict allowed Islamic State to expand, its roots lie in Iraq. This chapter aims to explore those factors in Iraq that led to the creation of Islamic State and its predecessors. It traces how the Hussein regime was willing to exploit political Islam, the impact of the US invasion and the subsequent decisions made during the US administration of Iraq particularly the impact of De-Ba'athification. It also aims to show how the sectarian policies of the Iraqi government fed the insurgency and opened a door for the Salafist-jihadists amongst others.

Iraq is a populous country of some 32 million people, divided amongst Arabs (75-80 percent), Kurds (15-20 percent) with the remainder being other smaller ethnic groups, such as Turkmen.⁶⁸ Of the majority Islamic sects in Iraq, the Shia are in the majority – some 65 percent, with the Sunni's (Arab and Kurd) making up the remaining 35 percent.⁶⁹ Iraq is also made up of 150 recognised tribes, which consist of some 2000 smaller clans.⁷⁰ Although a ruthless Ba'athist dictatorship, Iraq, under the thumb of Saddam Hussein, was a stable multi-sectarian nation. Kurds, Shia and Sunni had lived together, and intermarried.⁷¹ Since 2003, the altered power situation in Iraq has permitted long standing grievances to resurface, along with disputes over land and resources.⁷²

⁶⁸ Mabon and Royle, 20.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*, 1st ed. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015), 190.

⁷² Mabon and Royle, 21.

In April 1991, at American urging the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed UN Resolution 867. The sanctions not only effected the Hussein regime, but also acted as a collective punishment on all the Iraqi people; life become hard for the Iraqi people.⁷³ The strategic aim of the resolution and the US was that by placing pressure on the Iraqi people, they would seek to overthrow the Hussein regime. The sanctions regime was harsh, certain medications and foodstuffs were blocked on the grounds they may be used in manufacture of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).⁷⁴

Seeking to shore up support for his regime, Hussein turned to the one constant in the Middle East; Islam. Up until the early 2000s the Iraqi Ba'athist regime was secular. Although many of the Hussein leadership were practicing Muslims, political Islam was considered a threat to the regime. At the peak of the UN sanctions, Hussein launched the "Return to Faith Campaign".⁷⁵ This campaign was given physical shape in 2001, when Saddam inaugurated the Mother of All Battles Mosque (*Jami' Umm al-Ma'arik*).⁷⁶ The mosque was a cynical attempt to portray him as an Islamic leader. Construction of the mosque had commenced in 1993, the mosque architecture was dominated by anti-American slogans and references to Saddam's biography.⁷⁷ Prominent amongst the mosques features was a handwritten *Qur'an*, purportedly written in Saddam's own blood.⁷⁸ Iraq, has a history of political Islam dating to the formation of the Islamic Brotherhood Society in the 1940's. Initially, like many Islamic societies, the Society was largely preoccupied with social welfare and community outreach.⁷⁹ In

⁷³ Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, 1st ed. (California: University of California Press, 2015), 33.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Amatzia Baram, "From Militant Secularism to Islamism the Iraqi Ba'th Regime from 1968 - 2003," (United States: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 2011), 15.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Atwan, 34.

1960, the more politically orientated Iraqi Islamic Party was established. However, once the Ba'athists seized power in 1968, both the Iraqi Islamic Party and the Muslim Brotherhood were persecuted and driven underground.⁸⁰

As the second American invasion of Iraq loomed, Saddam Hussein sought to use Islam as a key element in developing an effective resistance.⁸¹ John Nixon, a former CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) senior leadership analyst who interrogated Saddam Hussein, states that Hussein: "...was not hostile to religion per se; he just demanded that he be allowed to control whatever religious activity there was in Iraq".⁸² Saddam Hussein was prepared to tolerate Islamist groups, if by supporting them they would assist Hussein in achieving strategic goals and did not challenge his own regime. An example is the support that the Hussein regime provided to the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) in Syria. Hussein backed the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood because they opposed Hafez al-Assad, who was Saddam's rival for leadership of the wider Ba'ath movement.⁸³ As such the Hussein regime tolerated the presence of jihadists in the border regions of Iraq and Iran, as the jihadists were strongly anti-Shia, and provided a buffer against Iran. These elements were under the control of *Ansar al-Islam* (Helpers of Islam) imposing *Shari'a* law on the towns and villages under its control.⁸⁴ *Ansar al-Islam* also provided a gateway for *al-Qaeda* operatives to enter Iraq.⁸⁵ That *Ansar al-Islam* was tolerated was a cynical ploy by Hussein's regime, as the group was in conflict with Iraq's Kurdish population.⁸⁶ Human rights reports from the time

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² John Nixon, *Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein*, 1st ed. (London: Bantam Press, 2016), 3.

⁸³ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁴ Andrew Hosken, *Empire of Fear: Inside the Islamic State*, 2nd ed. (London: Oneworld Publications, 2016), 26.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 26-27.

indicate that *Ansar al-Islam* was carrying out atrocities, such as beheading prisoners, that were to foreshadow Islamic State in its brutalities.⁸⁷ It was reported at the time that up to 57 Arab-Afghans had entered into Iraq through areas controlled by *Ansar al-Islam*, staging through Iran on their way from Afghanistan.⁸⁸ *Ansar al-Islam* would also later provide al-Zarqawi with a model for how jihadi governance could look like, as the group was an early adopter of the social media platforms that help make the Islamic State possible.⁸⁹ The *al-Qaeda* members had entered Iraq with instructions to contact sympathetic members of the Iraqi military. The newly Islamised members of the Iraqi army would, following the fall of Saddam Hussein, be invaluable to the Iraqi insurgency. Their combat experience and strategic expertise would be key to both the insurgency and to the rapid rise, and success of the Islamic State.⁹⁰ The presence of *Ansar al-Islam* would lead to accusations that Saddam Hussein's regime was colluding with *al-Qaeda*.

Accusations by the United States that Iraq was harbouring *al-Qaeda* operatives and manufacturing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) would lead to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.⁹¹ Although *al-Qaeda* members had entered Iraq, there were no direct linkages between them and the Hussein regime. In the aftermath of 9/11, there were those within the corridors of power in the US, who sought to draw such links.⁹² Whilst such claims have since proved to be demonstrably false, the US invasion of Iraq did create a space for *al-Qaeda*.⁹³ As examined below, the decisions made by the US post

⁸⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁹ Brian H Fishman, *The Master Plan: Isis, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*, 1st ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 23.

⁹⁰ Atwan, 34.

⁹¹ Hosken, 28.

⁹² Mabon and Royle, 48.

⁹³ Ibid.

invasion weakened the authority of the Iraqi state and created the conditions that gave rise to instability and insurgency. This created an unstable security environment that *al-Qaeda* could exploit.

In its latest iteration, the rapid rise of the Islamic State can be attributed partly to former Ba'athist military officers. For example, the Islamic State's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's two deputies Abu Ali al-Anbari and Abu Muslim al-Turkmani were both former Iraqi military officers. Al-Anbari was a major general, and Al-Turkmani was a lieutenant colonel in Iraqi military intelligence, skill sets that are invaluable for an insurgency.⁹⁴ Being native Iraqi, they had the established social and tribal links that would allow an insurgency to gain support from the local population. However, current research has begun to question the degree of influence these and other former regime members truly had on the expansion of ISIS/Islamic State. Craig Whiteside points to research that indicates, at least in the case of al-Anbari, some had long been associated to Iraqi Salafist-jihadist groups such as *Ansar al-Islam*.⁹⁵ However, Whiteside does state that Islamic State's leadership did, during 2003-2006, deliberately recruit capable, and religiously acceptable, former regime members to address a skills shortfall in military tactics and intelligence.⁹⁶ As Islamic State matured, and attracted experienced jihadists to its ranks there was less of a need to draw on the experience of former regime members..

The US invasion of Afghanistan also was to have significant consequences for the future of Iraq and later Syria. Following the bombing of Tora Bora in 2001, many

⁹⁴ Atwan, 50.

⁹⁵ Craig Whiteside, "A Pedigree of Terror: The Myth of the Ba'athist Influence in the Islamic State Movement," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2017).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

surviving *al-Qaeda* members filtered their way through Iran into *Ansar al-Islam* controlled areas.⁹⁷ In 2002, this influx included the Jordanian extremist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Whilst linked to *al-Qaeda*, both al-Zarqawi and *al-Qaeda* had held each other at arm's length. In Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi had maintained an independent training camp near Herat.⁹⁸ Al-Zarqawi named his group *Jama'at Jama'at al-Tawid wal Jihad* (Group of Monotheism and Jihad), situated away from the main *al-Qaeda* camps in eastern Afghanistan the group operated independently from *al-Qaeda* central. It was here that al-Zarqawi and his group became proficient in the art of infiltrating foreign fighters into an operational theatre, a skill set that would prove invaluable to the group establishing itself in Iraq and in Syria.⁹⁹ Al-Zarqawi had quickly realised the porous and insecure nature of the Iraq-Syria border, and the opportunity that it presented. Shortly after the US led invasion began, al-Zarqawi took a meeting with Mohammad Ibrahim Makkawi (an *al-Qaeda* military strategist), agreeing to help *al-Qaeda* recruits enter Iraq via Syria.¹⁰⁰ The US invasion was a military success; shock and awe at its height. The invasion of Iraq had taken just 21 days, with very little resistance from the Iraqi Army.¹⁰¹ The US had been hoping to repeat the success of their initial invasion of Afghanistan, in which their tactical success had transitioned quickly to an interim government.¹⁰² The Bush administration was quick to declare "Mission Accomplished in Iraq."¹⁰³ The UNSC (UN Security Council) passed UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1511 to guarantee international support for restoring stability and security in

⁹⁷ Atwan, 40.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰¹ Mabon and Royle, 43.

¹⁰² David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror*, 1st ed. (Carlton: Black Inc, 2016), 18.

¹⁰³ Mabon and Royle, 43.

Iraq.¹⁰⁴ What followed was something beyond mere hubris, with the American occupation being the catalyst for the rise of insurgent groups and their spread.

Post invasion, the US took control of the Iraq state, and established the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), an organisation that would prove to be ideologically driven, and disconnected from reality.¹⁰⁵ The purpose of the CPA was to provide a provisional government until a new Iraqi government could be formed. Formed from nothing and staffed often by inexperienced personal, who frequently had little to no experience of Iraq or the Middle East, the CPA was underprepared for, and isolated from, the realities of the situation in Iraq. As demonstrated below, decisions made by the CPA would play a leading role in creating the conditions that would lead to insurgency and the eventual rise of the Islamic State. Headed by the “contemptuous” Paul Bremer, the CPA set about dismantling the remnants of the Hussein regime.¹⁰⁶ As Emma Sky, a former advisor to the US military, suggests Bremer felt that there were no credible Iraqi leaders, and that it would be up to the US to directly administer Iraq.¹⁰⁷ Orders were issued for the “De-Ba’athification” of Iraq the effect of which was to render unemployed large sections of Iraq’s military and civil service.¹⁰⁸ CPA Order Number 1: “De-Ba’athification of Iraqi Society” provided the authority for the dismantling of Iraq’s military and civil society.¹⁰⁹ The intent to remove all remnants of the Ba’ath party from Iraqi society had been articulated at the creation of the CPA, with the then Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld stating in a memo that the Coalition

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Henin, 65.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Sky, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Henin, 66.

¹⁰⁹ Ambassador L Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope*, 1st ed. (New York Threshold Editions, 2006), 40.

would eliminate the remnants of Saddam's regime.¹¹⁰ CPA Order Number 2: "Dissolution of Entities" articulated which entities were to be disestablished.¹¹¹ These included the Ministry of Defence, all national security ministries and the Republican Guard; it also terminated the service of all members of the former military.¹¹² The vacuum left in the wake of the orders created a space for the emergence of various militias, both Shia and Sunni, for whom the skills of the former soldiers would prove invaluable.¹¹³

A further error was made by the CPA, when they sought to create a new Iraqi government out of members of the Iraqi diaspora, many of who had been absent from Iraq for decades and lacked the capability, and most importantly, the legitimacy needed to govern.¹¹⁴ With Iraq's security apparatus dismantled, looting became widespread.¹¹⁵ Iraq's already precarious infrastructure was further degraded, as looters stole telephone lines, electrical lines and anything that could be turned to profit on the black-market.¹¹⁶ Emma Sky quotes an anonymous Iraqi, whom she met in an art gallery shortly after she arrived in Iraq: "All Iraqis are happy to see the end of Saddam. But we are frustrated with the lawlessness – and the lack of electricity and water."¹¹⁷ The US Administration was incredulous at such reports, mocking journalists who reported on the worsening security situation.¹¹⁸ On the ground the American forces were exhausted, were constrained in numbers, skills, and left without the necessary command guidance to

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 57.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Mabon and Royle, 49.

¹¹⁴ Henin, 66.

¹¹⁵ Andrew J Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2016), 253.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Sky, 12.

¹¹⁸ Bacevich, 253.

contain the insurgency.¹¹⁹ A significant cause for some of the instability was the CPA itself.¹²⁰ Subject to the inter-agency rivalries that plague the US government, the CPA was created from nothing, having to develop processes, procedures and structures as it developed.¹²¹ It was also chronically undermanned with military staff, in roles they weren't trained for, filling in for civilians.¹²² The civilian staff that were available to fill positions, were on short term contracts, often young, inexperienced and lacked the necessary experience in post-conflict reconstruction.¹²³

As the security situation deteriorated, the violence increased. In the latter half of 2003, insurgents carried out attacks against embassies and NGOs (Non-Government Organisation), culminating in the August 19 attack on the UN offices in Baghdad, which killed the UN special envoy for Iraq, Vieira de Mello.¹²⁴ The invasion had collapsed the Iraqi state, Iraq had become an example of Hobbes' "state of nature" thesis in which everyone used violence to achieve their goals.¹²⁵ Iraq's new political process was birthed in a state of violence and occupation.¹²⁶ Government posts, allocated on the basis of sect and ethnicity, institutionalised sectarianism.¹²⁷ In respect to the effects of the invasion and rule of the CPA, Mabon and Royle state: " This left Iraq as a state that failed to maintain control over its borders, failing in its responsibilities in terms of territoriality, lacking a monopoly over the use of the legitimate use of force and with a government that would soon embark on a programme

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 254.

¹²⁰ Sky, 102.

¹²¹ Ibid., 103.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Henin, 67.

¹²⁵ Sky, 153.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

of exclusionary policies.”¹²⁸ Andrew J. Bacevich cites Operation Cyclone, the American’s covert operations against the Soviets in Afghanistan: “Operation Cyclone illustrates one of the central ironies of America’s Greater War for the Middle East – the unwitting tendency, while intently focusing on solving one problem, to exacerbate a second and plant the seeds for a third.”¹²⁹ It is worth noting that this is a key feature of American intervention in the Middle East, that the United States has a propensity to concentrate on resolving one issue without giving much regard to the second, and third order effects. So, it was with the de-Ba’athification of Iraq.

From its inception, the insurgency in Iraq was never a single monolithic entity, but instead consisted of multiple actors and constantly shifting alliances. The Iraqi insurgents were a mix of local secular nationalists, former Ba’athists, former Iraqi military and members of the security services.¹³⁰ Some such as Haji Bakr, a former Brigadier-General in Saddam’s intelligence services would later be crucial in the formation of the Islamic State.¹³¹ Documents located after Bakr was killed in Syria in 2014, show him as the architect of Islamic States intelligence network.¹³² Whilst it is easy to point to former members of the Ba’athist regime as instigators of the insurgency, as the US administration at the time did, this isn’t entirely accurate.¹³³ As Jason Burke points out, many of the attacks on coalition forces were spontaneous, and involved groups of friends, worshippers at the same mosque, even men whose children attended the same school.¹³⁴ Former Ba’athists and the Salafist-jihadists formed short term

¹²⁸ Mabon and Royle, 49-50.

¹²⁹ Bacevich, 52.

¹³⁰ Hosken, 40.

¹³¹ Ibid., 41.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Jason Burke, *The New Threat: The Past, Present, and Future of Islamic Militancy*, 1st ed. (New York: The New Press, 2015), 61.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

strategic alliances as both sought to use the other as a vehicle to power. At the time, there were up to seven major Sunni Islamist groups in active conflict in Iraq; *Jama'at al-Tawid wal Jihad* with its large numbers of foreign fighters being the most dominant.¹³⁵ Shia groups also proliferated, the most significant of which was Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Soon after the insurgency commenced, the Sunni Islamist groups were merged under the umbrella group *Jaish Ansar al- Sunna* (Army of the Followers of the Teachings).¹³⁶ *Jama'at al-Tawid wal Jihad* remained outside of this alliance, even though both groups espoused a similar ideology.

Iraq had quickly become an ideal place for *jihād*: a chaotic security situation, porous borders, especially with Syria, and an almost constant stream of foreign fighters. As one US general described it, Iraq had become a “terrorist magnet” with American forces considered a “target of opportunity”.¹³⁷ American military tactics were also adding fuel to the insurgency. Night raids, and the detention of suspected insurgents, were causing a deepening resentment amongst the Iraqis.¹³⁸ In a culture in which honour and respect are held high, the humiliation of men in front of their wives and families would create many of what David Kilcullen refers to as “accidental guerrillas.”¹³⁹ Uncomfortable parallels were also being drawn between the actions of the US military, and the methodology of Israeli forces in the West Bank and Gaza.¹⁴⁰ Military detention centres had become places of wanton criminal abuse; Abu Ghraib later becoming the symbol of such abuses.¹⁴¹ The international community began to express its concern

¹³⁵ Atwan, 46.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹³⁷ Bacevich, 259.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 263.

¹³⁹ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Scribe, 2009), xiv.

¹⁴⁰ Bacevich, 264.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

over the American approach in Iraq, with political and military figures regularly airing their concerns in the media.¹⁴² Bacevich states: “War is inherently a political act. Abu Ghraib represented a political setback of monumental proportions, so much so that we may date the failure of the Third Gulf War from this point.”¹⁴³

Iraq also held symbolic value for the jihadists as well, as the seat of the Abbasid dynasty.¹⁴⁴ Ruling for five hundred years, the Abbasid Caliphate arguably represents a pinnacle of Islamic success.¹⁴⁵ After it was conquered in 1258 C.E, Baghdad, also represents a low point in Islam’s history, with the Mongol conquest a historical memory of internal weakness and of invasion by external powers.¹⁴⁶ Both *al-Qaeda* and the Islamic State have used this theme of foreign powers assaulting Islam and invading Islamic lands, to recruit supporters and attract fighters to their organisations.¹⁴⁷ For the jihadist groups Iraq, following the American invasion, was rife with symbolism. For the jihadists, the belief held by many Iraqi Sunnis that the Mongol overthrow of the Abbasid Caliphate was aided and abetted by the Shia, provided an ideological framework.¹⁴⁸ The jihadists could frame the American occupation, and the ascent of Shia, as a repetition of this historical moment. For the jihadists, this confirmed the idea of Shia antagonism, and underlined the need for them to confront the American occupation.¹⁴⁹ As Barak Mendelson states: “It served as a rallying cry for Sunnis to join the insurgency in Iraq and led the most radical elements – al-Zarqawi and his followers – to view all Shia as collaborators and enemies who could be legitimately killed.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴² Sky, 100.

¹⁴³ Bacevich, 266.

¹⁴⁴ Mendelson, 88.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

This isn't a viewpoint that was unique to al-Zarqawi and his acolytes, but also shared by the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, who take the view that Shia beliefs are contrary to the tenets of Islam.¹⁵¹ The Sunni Islamists' strategy revolves around the intention to drive out the US and Coalition forces, and then create an Islamic state in Iraq. Iraq, for them, was a much more attractive battlefield, Arabic speaking and culturally familiar. The presence of the Arabs in Afghanistan, in particular the Salafist-jihadist Arabs, caused many difficulties.¹⁵² The principle differences laid in the differing schools of Islam. Afghans in the main belong to the Sufi and Hanafi schools of thought, the Salafists view both as heretics.¹⁵³ At times, the differences came close to fighting. For example, Hamid and Farrall cite an incident in Kandahar in which the Afghans almost came to blows with the Arabs.¹⁵⁴ The Arabs had gone to the tombs of fallen Afghans, and remove all the flags marking the tombs of the martyrs, the flags being considered *shirk* (idolatry) by the Arabs.¹⁵⁵ It was only through the intervention of the leadership of both sides that armed conflict was prevented.¹⁵⁶ The rigidity of the Arabs Salafi doctrine created tensions amongst the *Taliban* leadership. The Arabs were viewed as being a corrupting influence on the *Taliban* youth, turning them away from the traditions and cultural practices of Afghanistan.¹⁵⁷

The cultural and language differences which had caused difficulties in Afghanistan now allowed the foreign fighters to easily blend into the ethno-political

¹⁵¹ Hosken, 69.

¹⁵² Hamid and Farrall, 37.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 74.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 201.

landscape of the burgeoning Iraqi insurgency. Iraq's Sunni population, paralleling the Taliban's support for *al-Qaeda*, initially offered support to *Jama'at al-Tawid wal Jihad*. Al-Zarqawi's fighters were given safe passage, money and shelter in the Sunni heartlands.¹⁵⁸ From the outset of the insurgency, al-Zarqawi's strategy was more than just fighting the US occupation. Al-Zarqawi believed that fomenting a conflict between the new Shia led government and Iraq's Sunni population can create a sectarian conflict and the necessary ungoverned space/weak state that extremists need to consolidate and expand. Having sworn *bayat* (allegiance) to Osama bin Laden and *al-Qaeda* in late 2004, *Jama'at al-Tawid wal Jihad* changed its title to *Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* (Organisation of Jihad's Base in Mesopotamia) also called al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, but more commonly known as, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).¹⁵⁹ As Mendelson points out this would later prove to be a self-destructive act on the behalf of *al-Qaeda*. AQI would undermine *al-Qaeda*'s ideological coherence and its sectarian violence would permanently stain *al-Qaeda*'s reputation.¹⁶⁰ Mendelson further states that al-Zarqawi sought to merge his *Jama'at al-Tawid wal Jihad* group with *al-Qaeda* for two reasons. One, was out of necessity for the implementation of al-Zarqawi's strategy of sectarian conflict.¹⁶¹ Al-Zarqawi and *Jama'at al-Tawid wal Jihad*'s strategy for a sectarian war in Iraq, required considerable resources, in terms of finances and human resources.¹⁶²

By becoming *al-Qaeda*'s official regional branch, al-Zarqawi would be able to tap into *al-Qaeda*'s network, resources and brand recognition.¹⁶³ In many respects 21st

¹⁵⁸ Atwan, 48.

¹⁵⁹ Mendelson, 116.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 118.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

Century terrorist organisations are businesses for which marketing and brand recognition are as important as it is for a legitimate business. By joining *al-Qaeda*, al-Zarqawi gained brand recognition, strengthened legitimacy, access to *al-Qaeda*'s logistical and propaganda capabilities, and *al-Qaeda*'s network of donors, which led to more resources and foreign recruits.¹⁶⁴ The second aspect was that al-Zarqawi maintained his independence. *Jama'at al-Tawid wal Jihad* had become an *al-Qaeda* franchise under the condition that it was free to continue its sectarian strategy in Iraq.¹⁶⁵ Although this strategy ran counter to *al-Qaeda*'s which had focused on confronting the United States, there was little the *al-Qaeda* leadership could do to alter the situation.¹⁶⁶ Al-Zarqawi took control of *al-Qaeda*'s narrative at a point in time where the groups founders were immobilized, challenging their ability to lead the *jihād*.¹⁶⁷

As an organisation, AQI, was vastly different from its parent in Afghanistan. *Al-Qaeda* central reflected Osama bin Laden, an economics major and international businessman, and as such was very bureaucratic in its structure and recruitment. AQI, was the sum of al-Zarqawi's experience, and more closely resembled a criminal organisation, a gang, and as such was a model easily replicated elsewhere.¹⁶⁸ It accepted all comers, with its recruits not needing to prove their jihadist credentials to the same extent. For a period, the group flourished and enjoyed a degree of support from within Iraq. But al-Zarqawi continued to pursue a sectarian agenda, directing much of the group's activities to instigate violence against Iraq's Shia population.¹⁶⁹ Although *al-*

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Lawrence Wright, *The Terror Years: From Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 192.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Mendelson, 123.

Qaeda's principal leadership were opposed to al-Zarqawi's sectarian agenda, the group helped rally support for their Iraqi affiliate, with a constant stream of new recruits seeking to join AQI.¹⁷⁰

Al-Zarqawi's ruthless violence and continuous targeting of fellow Muslims was quickly losing him and his group support from *al-Qaeda*'s leadership. Following the November 2005 attempted triple suicide bombing in Jordan, al-Zarqawi drew a rebuke from *al-Qaeda*'s deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹⁷¹ *Al-Qaeda*'s leadership were deeply concerned that al-Zarqawi's brand of violence was damaging *al-Qaeda*'s image in Iraq. Because of concerns with al-Zarqawi's strategy, senior leaders within *al-Qaeda*, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Atiyatallah al-Libi, wrote letters to al-Zarqawi expressing their concerns.¹⁷² Al-Zawahiri was diplomatic in addressing al-Zarqawi, but was critical of al-Zarqawi for his violence against Iraq's Shia. Instead of pursuing his sectarian strategy, al-Zawahiri extolled al-Zarqawi to redirect his energies to the expulsion of American forces from Iraq.¹⁷³ As analysts would later remark, al-Zarqawi had selected targets that would confound American ambitions in Iraq, and which would ensure American entanglement in the insurgency.¹⁷⁴ Al-Zawahiri objected to the targeting of the Shia on both strategic and doctrinal grounds. In his opinion, Iraq's Shia should be treated as fellow Muslims. They were not to be treated as heretics if their actions were out of ignorance, and rather should be educated and guided to the truth.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Atwan, 50.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Mendelson, 120.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 121.

¹⁷⁴ Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of Isis*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2015), 113.

¹⁷⁵ Mendelson, 121.

Whilst al-Zawahiri had couched his criticism in a way as not to target al-Zarqawi, al-Libi was much blunter in his critique.¹⁷⁶ Al-Libi pointedly told al-Zarqawi that he needed to change tack, and adhere to the instructions from *al-Qaeda* central.¹⁷⁷ Al-Libi stated that al-Zarqawi should do more to win the hearts and minds of Iraq's Sunni population, and should be careful not to target respected religious scholars or tribal leaders.¹⁷⁸ Al-Libi also rebuked al-Zarqawi over the attacks in Jordan, stating that the conduct of operations into a new region was a strategic decision that could only be made by *al-Qaeda*'s senior leadership.¹⁷⁹ *Al-Qaeda*'s senior leadership had believed that by adopting *Jama'at al-Tawid wal Jihad* as its affiliate, it would give *al-Qaeda*'s leadership control of the jihadist narrative in Iraq. This was both naive and to no avail. It was perhaps symptomatic of the isolation of *al-Qaeda*'s senior leadership that al-Zarqawi chose to ignore them, and independently launched a devastating attack in Samarra against the Shia al-Askari Mosque.¹⁸⁰

To address concerns that al-Zarqawi was imposing his wider agenda on what was still at its core an Iraqi civil war, an umbrella group of Sunni insurgent groups was formed. Named the Mujahideen Shura Council and headed by a native Iraqi, Abdullah Rashid al-Baghdadi, the council aimed to ease concerns that foreigners had subverted the Iraqi insurgency.¹⁸¹ Although the Mujahideen Shura Council was billed as an ally of *al-Qaeda* and six other minor jihadi groups, it was dominated by members from AQI.¹⁸² The other groups making up the council were relatively small, with no real operational

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 122.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 123.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 124.

¹⁸² Ibid.

impact. Their main purpose was to be a shield against any claim that al-Zarqawi had made a unilateral power grab.¹⁸³ Some groups refused to join the Council out of opposition to the sectarian violence embraced by al-Zarqawi, some such as *Jaysh al-Islam* (Islamic Army in Iraq), spoke out against al-Zarqawi.¹⁸⁴ Al-Zarqawi continued to fall from favour with *al-Qaeda*'s leadership, and was demoted from leadership of AQI in April of 2006.¹⁸⁵ Al-Zarqawi's savagery had made him a marked man, and a target for the American counter-insurgency machine. By June of 2006, al-Zarqawi had been tracked and killed by the Americans.¹⁸⁶ In October 2006, not long after the death of al-Zarqawi, the Mujahideen Shura Council rebranded itself as the Islamic State in Iraq (*Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyyah* - ISI), under the leadership of an Iraqi Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.¹⁸⁷

Al-Baghdadi was introduced as the *Amir al-Mu'minin*, a title which declared him as the "Commander/Prince of the Faithful", an honorific that laid claim to leadership of the entire Muslim *ummah* (community, short for *ummat al-Islamiyah* the Islamic Community).¹⁸⁸ By declaring himself as such al-Baghdadi implicitly announced himself as the Caliph of the Islamic State of Iraq, and changed his name to Abu Omar al-Husseini al-Qurayshi al-Baghdadi.¹⁸⁹ By using al-Qurayshi in his name al-Baghdadi was claiming to be descended from the tribe of the prophet Mohammad (PBUH).¹⁹⁰ Such claims drew criticisms from Salafist-jihadist intellectuals and theorists who stated that al-Baghdadi had gone too far in his claims.¹⁹¹ The announcement of the formation

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Hosken, 83.

¹⁸⁵ Atwan, 51.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Hosken, 84.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 87.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 88.

of ISI and its intentions to form a Caliphate, caught the *al-Qaeda* senior leadership off guard. *Al-Qaeda* communications from the time, indicated that the senior leadership was unfamiliar with Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and were displeased with the groups intentions.¹⁹² According to Mendelson: “ISI leaders insisted they were justified in announcing the state, because during wartime, a Muslim who overpowers enemies is allowed to establish an Islamic state through imposition, alluding to (and embellishing) the group’s military success.”¹⁹³ Mendelson points to ISI as issuing a direct challenge to al-Zawahiri and *al-Qaeda*’s mantle of leadership for the jihad. ISI claimed that only the fighters directly involved in the jihad could select a Caliph, not the scholars and other Muslim leaders.¹⁹⁴ Like its offspring the Islamic State, ISI established ruling councils and imposed *Shari’a* law in those areas of western Iraq that were under its sway.¹⁹⁵

ISI had become the dominant force in large segments of Western Iraq, becoming the dominant actor in an area from Samarra and Mosul to Kirkuk.¹⁹⁶ ISI quickly become the destination of choice for foreign fighters and Iraqi jihadists.¹⁹⁷ The bulk of these fighters were from within the Middle East, from Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere, most of whom had infiltrated across the Syrian border.¹⁹⁸ The United States and the Iraqi government sought to counter the jihadist threat by reaching out to disaffected Sunni tribes in the Anbar province.¹⁹⁹ The US invasion of Iraq created dramatic changes in the structure of the Iraqi state.²⁰⁰ It was expected that the Iraqi

¹⁹² Mendelson, 123.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 124.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Fishman, 218.

¹⁹⁶ Atwan, 51.

¹⁹⁷ Hosken, 105.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Atwan, 51.

²⁰⁰ Ronen Zeidel, "Tribes in Iraq: A Negligible Factor in State Formation," in *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, ed. Uzi Rabi (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 171.

tribes would step in to fill the political vacuum left in the wake of Saddam's removal, and yet this did not happen.²⁰¹ Saddam had sought to fill the ranks of the Army, the Republican Guard, and other security services with members of his own tribe, the Albu Nasir of 'Auja, later expanded to include others from the Tikriti region.²⁰² However, much of this tribalisation by the Ba'athists came during periods of political instability; the 1958 revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the first Gulf war, and the subsequent Shia Intifada in 1991.²⁰³ But whilst the tribes were trusted as members of the security apparatus, true political power was retained solely by Saddam.²⁰⁴ Tribes that supported the Hussein regime were rewarded for their loyalty and at times were heralded as bastions of the state.²⁰⁵ For the Hussein regime, in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War and the impact of the sanctions imposed in its wake, tribal loyalty was a means of ensuring stability.²⁰⁶ By the time of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq's tribes had experienced over a decade of empowerment.²⁰⁷ As a consequence, the tribes were too conspicuous to ignore. Made up of Sunni extremists, former Ba'athists and Iraqi nationalists, the basis of the resistance was religious and sectarian in nature.²⁰⁸ But within the provinces, predominantly the Anbar province, the resistance took on a tribal aspect. Operational zones were based upon tribal regions and secured by militias from the tribe and sub-tribal groups.²⁰⁹

As this structure spread across Iraq, other militias were also formed across social and religious lines. In response to the sectarian nature of ISI, Iraq's Shia also formed

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 180.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 181.

²⁰⁵ Mabon and Royle, 83.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Zeidel, 182.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

militias, the results being that by early 2006, Iraq had been plunged into a sectarian civil war.²¹⁰ In briefings produced by the US military at the time, Iraq was openly considered as being a failed state, or on the verge of becoming one.²¹¹ It was a five-way split, between Sunni, Shia, the Iraqi government, the Americans, and ISI. The Sunni tribes of Anbar suffered extensively, as their tribal members and leadership were targeted by ISI.²¹² Mabon and Royle cite the example of Sheikh Nasr al-Fahdawi of the Albu Fahad tribe.²¹³ He was killed by one of his own tribesmen on the orders of AQI, because of his involvement in negotiations with the Americans.²¹⁴ As Mabon and Royle state: “This tactic, commonly used by AQI, ensured that they were able to control and restrict tribal coordination, but it also paradoxically triggered the survivalist instincts of the tribes around them.”²¹⁵ It was within Anbar, and under the leadership of the Abu Risha subtribe of the Dulaim, that the Americans were approached by the regions tribes.²¹⁶

The *Sahwa* (Awakening/Resurgence) campaign was launched in 2006. Sunni tribes, tired of the abuses inflicted by ISI were encouraged to side with the Americans and contribute forces to a new Sunni militia group, *Abnaa al-Iraq* (the Sons of Iraq).²¹⁷ Led by tribal leader Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha, the movement spread to other areas and by 2007 had an estimated 100,000 men under arms.²¹⁸ In response to the successful co-option of Anbar’s Sunni tribes, the United States committed an additional 21,500 ground troops to the Iraqi campaign under what was to become known as the

²¹⁰ Zeidel, 183.

²¹¹ Bacevich, 276.

²¹² Zeidel, 183.

²¹³ Mabon and Royle, 87.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Zeidel, 183.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Atwan, 52.

“Surge”.²¹⁹ The campaign was largely successful with significant inroads made against ISI throughout 2007 and into 2008.

However, the success of the “Surge” is debatable; it can be argued that all it achieved was a continuation of a temporary decline in violence.²²⁰ Whilst the security situation in Iraq had improved temporarily, violence and the insurgency persisted.²²¹ The success of the *Sahwa* did not come lightly. Sheikh Abu Risha was killed in September 2007 at the hands of ISI, but by 2008 both the American and Iraqi governments were confident that they had broken the back of the insurgency.²²² So confident were the Iraqi and American administrations, that in late 2008 the two governments began negotiating the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq. Under the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed on 27 November 2008, the US began a staged withdrawal from 2009, departing Iraq completely by the end of 2011.²²³

The US withdrawal is an example of what happens when a conflict is drawn out. The Iraq conflict had reached a point whereby domestic politics outweigh strategic considerations.²²⁴ Elected on a campaign promise to get US forces out of Iraq, the Obama administration attempted to withdraw from Iraq as quickly as it could.²²⁵ A critical error was made in late 2008, when the US handed control of the *Abnaa al-Iraq* over to the Maliki government. Having received extensive military training from the US, these fighters had been led to believe that they would be adsorbed into the new

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Bacevich, 286.

²²¹ Ibid., 290.

²²² Atwan, 52.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Bacevich, 291.

²²⁵ Ibid.

Iraqi government, and would be given position in either the public administration or within the security forces.²²⁶ It was now that the optimism of the American strategy in recruiting tribal militias was exposed. The Shia dominated Maliki government dismissed the *Abnaa al-Iraq* without compensation and on sectarian grounds. Only a small number of the *Abnaa al-Iraq* were able to secure employment within the Iraqi government.²²⁷ This posed a threat to the very provinces, which had been secured from the predatory advances of ISI.²²⁸ Without hope of securing their future and without means to provide for their families, the remnants of the *Abnaa al-Iraq* were absorbed into the insurgency.²²⁹ These men, having been trained by the US, having gained combat experience alongside the Americans, in 2014 became the backbone of the Islamic State's army.²³⁰ Throughout 2009, ISI carried out a series of attacks on the Maliki government. For instance, in August of 2009, a combined mortar and VBIED (Vehicle Bourne Improvised Explosive Device) attack against the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Finance killed 122 people.²³¹ Although renewed efforts were made to quell the insurgency, 2010 remained a period of political instability. It created a security vacuum that ISI sought to fill. Al-Maliki's second term was marked by increasing corruption and allegations of authoritarianism. Al-Maliki sought to centralise control under himself and trusted cronies. He appointed new army and security chiefs without parliamentary approval, and appointed himself Minister of Defence and Minister of the Interior and National Security.²³² Maliki had become increasingly remote and isolated, neither trusting the Sunni, nor his fellow Shia in the Sadrist Shia Party.²³³ Maliki made

²²⁶ Zeidel, 183.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Atwan, 53.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid., 54.

²³³ Henin, 72.

attempts to play the nationalist card to garner support, but was constrained in this by the risk of alienating the Kurds.²³⁴ Al-Maliki took steps to ensure that former Ba'athists were excluded from the corridors of power by passing new legislation.²³⁵ In addition to running his own militias, al-Maliki's administration was suffering from accountability and transparency issues. American commanders had expressed doubts about al-Maliki's suitability with some, such as General David Petraeus's executive officer Colonel Peter Mansoor, holding the viewpoint that al-Maliki's only goal was looking after himself.²³⁶ Some US\$100 billion in foreign aid had been poured into Iraq during al-Maliki's reign, much of which was unaccounted for.²³⁷ Many of the security forces were ghosts, in that they appeared on the books and were paid salaries but no one knew if they reported for duty, or even if they existed.²³⁸ In a secret cable Peter Crocker, the US Ambassador to Iraq in 2007, expressed concern about the al-Maliki administration and the concentration of power in the hands of Shia Islamists, which was beginning to mirror Hussein's authoritarian regime.²³⁹

By the summer of 2010, the security situation in Iraq had deteriorated. Insurgent and sectarian attacks were on the rise and the Iraqi public were losing confidence in the ability of the state to protect them. As the result, many turned to local and often sectarian militias for security.²⁴⁰ Little heed was taken to warning signs that *al-Qaeda* was increasing its influence in Iraq. With no truly representative, or competent, government in place by the completion of the US withdrawal in December of 2011, Iraq

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Atwan, 54.

²³⁶ Hosken, 147.

²³⁷ Atwan, 55.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Hosken, 150.

²⁴⁰ Atwan, 55.

collapsed back into violence. As Nicolas Henin described the situation: “the departure of the last American troops paradoxically initiated a new period of instability, under the leadership of the highly authoritarian and sectarian Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. As a result, in much of Iraq, US occupation was replaced by a much more insidious phenomenon – *self-occupation* by the country’s own security forces.”²⁴¹ Fomented by the corrupt and exclusionary policies of the al-Maliki government, Iraq was subjected to a renewed and deeply sectarian insurgency.²⁴² With the fabric of Iraqi society torn asunder and divided into enclaves dominated by Sunni and Shia militias; any protests were ruthlessly suppressed.²⁴³

Adding fuel to the fire was the merging of ISI with *al-Qaeda*’s Syrian affiliate the Salafist-jihadist group *Jabhat al-Nusra* in April 2013.²⁴⁴ Declaring itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (*ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi ‘l-Iraq wa-sh-sham - ISIS*) the group announced its arrival by launching a series of raids against the Iraqi prisons in Abu Ghraib and Taji. The raids released hundreds of *al-Qaeda* leaders and fighters and was a massive blow to the al-Maliki government. ISIS bolstered its ranks with hundreds of experienced Salafist-jihadists who sought revenge on those that had imprisoned them.²⁴⁵ ISIS was to strengthen and consolidate its grip on the Iraqi insurgency, expanding its violence to carry out massacres of Christians, Kurds and Yazidis. ISIS aimed to gain control of Iraq’s economic resources, and launched campaigns to wrest control of Iraq’s lucrative oilfields away from the central government and the Kurdish administration in the North.²⁴⁶ In the summer of 2014, ISIS

²⁴¹ Henin, xiii.

²⁴² Atwan, 55.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 56.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 57.

launched an offensive with the aim of seizing Mosul and securing the northern oilfields.²⁴⁷ Gutted by the reckless, sectarian policies of the Maliki regime, unable to pose a credible, or any real defence, the Iraqi army melted away.²⁴⁸ The poorly equipped, badly led soldiers voted with their feet; why should they die for a corrupt regime?²⁴⁹ On 11 June 2014, ISIS seized Tikrit; by 29 June, ISIS had declared its Caliphate.²⁵⁰

Throughout 2013 and 2014, Iraq's political crisis escalated. Al-Maliki had become increasingly isolated, losing the support of both the Kurds and the United States. Many blamed al-Maliki for Iraq's situation, journalist Patrick Cockburn quotes Iraqi political scientist Ghassan al-Attayah: "He may have won over the Shia, but he has lost Iraq."²⁵¹ The fatal blow for al-Maliki came when Iran withdrew its support.²⁵² ISIS made the most of the chaotic scene, forming alliances with local Sunni groups, tribes and former Ba'athists. The situation in Iraq had deteriorated to such an extent, that in 2014 when ISIS forces entered Mosul, they were greeted by cheering crowds.²⁵³ In May 2014, al-Maliki managed to secure re-election, but it was short lived; by August 2014 Iraq's president Fouad Massoum had removed al-Maliki from office.²⁵⁴ The realisation that the al-Maliki government had created a security vacuum came too late. By the summer of 2014, al-Maliki had been unseated. His replacement Haider al-Abadi, offered hope for change and began to institute reforms.²⁵⁵ Al-Abadi aimed to address

²⁴⁷ Wright, 313.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Atwan, 57.

²⁵⁰ Wright, 313.

²⁵¹ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 332.

²⁵² Atwan, 57.

²⁵³ Ibid., 58.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Mabon and Royle, 51.

the socio-economic conditions that were the cause of much of Iraq's instability.²⁵⁶ However, by late 2014, ISIS was well on its way to establishing itself as the lead Salafist-jihadist group in the region.

In summary, we can see that even under the repressive regime of Saddam Hussein there was a deep strain of political Islam within Iraq. One that the Hussein regime was willing to exploit for its own ends against perceived rivals. As discussed, this link to Salafist-jihadists along with Iraq's suspected WMD program was used as justification for the invasion of Iraq. The US invasion would prove to be a trigger for the events that followed. De-Ba'athification and the failure to provide for the security of the Iraqi population post-invasion would lead to a deterioration of the Iraqi security environment. In the period post-invasion, Iraqis would turn to others for their security; tribal and sectarian militias along with the Salafist-jihadists would become the arbiters of security. The sectarian policies of the al-Maliki government would create a situation that was exploited by ISI and later Islamic State. ISI/Islamic State deliberately exacerbated the sectarian tensions. It was this willingness to target other Muslims that set ISI/Islamic State apart from *al-Qaeda*. It was these factors; exploitation of political Islam, the US invasion and De-Ba'athification and increasing sectarian divisions that created the conditions that led to the emergence of Islamic State.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

Fitna

Both Iraq and Syria provided the conditions that led to the rise of the Islamic State. However equally important is the division that occurred between *al-Qaeda* and Islamic State. The following chapter examines the split between the two Salafist-jihadist groups. It looks at how and why such a split occurred and how it has impacted on the rise of Islamic State. It also examines the divisions and changing alliances amongst the Salafist-jihadist communities considering the rise of Islamic State.

In Arabic, the term *fitna* refers to a period of revolt, disturbance or to a civil war which leads to a schism, it is a fitting description for the split that occurred between Islamic State and *Jabhat al-Nusra/al-Qaeda*. Just as significant as the political instability in Iraq and Syria is to the rise of Islamic State, so is the ideological and physical rivalry between Islamic State and *al-Qaeda*. The groups differ extensively from each other, not only because of the personal animosity between al-Baghdadi and al-Zawahiri over the claims of leadership of the jihad, but the strategy that each group pursues.²⁵⁷ Islamic State is focused on the creation of its own Caliphate, and it is far more ruthless in doing so.²⁵⁸ Both organisations are competing for the hearts and minds of the existing jihadist networks. The ties are broad, stretching from the tribal regions in Afghanistan and Pakistan, across the Middle East, into the *Sahel* (transitional region between the Sahara and the Sudanian savanna) and into South East Asia.²⁵⁹ Neither group can exist without the long-term support of these networks. *Al-Qaeda* has been the

²⁵⁷ Burke, 17.

²⁵⁸ Rohan Gunaratna and Aviv Oreg, *The Global Jihad Movement*, 1st ed. (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 366.

²⁵⁹ Burke, 18.

primary architect and beneficiary of these networks, much of which has been based on personal relationships and shared combat experience. In the Syrian case *Jabhat al-Nusra* is perceived as being more authentically Syrian than Islamic State, which is considered a foreign imposition upon the Syrian uprising.²⁶⁰ As Charles Lister points out *al-Nusra* had acquired broad acceptance and admiration amongst the opposition and had attracted many Syrians to its ranks.²⁶¹ Islamic State has rejected the *al-Qaeda* strategy of targeting the “far enemy”, instead choosing to pursue targets much closer to home.²⁶²

Broadly speaking the ideological split can be likened to the difference between old school mafia (*al-Qaeda*) and new urban street gang (ISIS). This phenomenon in which Salafist-jihadi beliefs mix with gang culture was noted by Jason Burke in the wake of the murder of British soldier Lee Rigby in May 2013. Described as “Jihadi-Cool”, Burke noted the propensity for youth gangs in Muslim majority areas in England to blend the language and dress of the Salafists with gang culture.²⁶³ Laura Huey also points the extensive use of social media by Salafist-jihadists in which online communities have become a primary means of radicalisation.²⁶⁴ The members of such groups often had a superficial relationship with Islam, and even after some had chosen the militant path, they retained their criminal links.²⁶⁵ Fawaz A. Gerges also points to a generational difference between Islamic State and its predecessors. He states the previous waves of jihadists during the 70s and 90s drew their leaders from the “social

²⁶⁰ Gunaratna and Oreg, 366.

²⁶¹ Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 115.

²⁶² Burke, 17.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁶⁴ Laura Huey, "This Is Not Your Mother's Terrorism: Social Media, Online Radicalization and the Practice of Political Jamming," *Journal of Terrorism Research* 6, no. 2 (2015).

²⁶⁵ Burke, 181.

elite”, such as bin Laden, and al-Zawahiri, and were supported by the educated middle class.²⁶⁶ Gerges argues that Islamic State lacks the same intellectual and theological base, drawing the bulk of its support and combatants from the lower middle class and rural poor.²⁶⁷ Islamic State has developed its propaganda to appeal to a younger generation, one that sees political violence as being part of its counter culture.²⁶⁸

The old guard, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, believed in a slower approach, seeking to remove foreign influence and those Arab regimes that they saw as being apostate.²⁶⁹ Al-Zarqawi, in perhaps a reflection of his background as a petty thug and criminal, sought a quicker more violent route to achieving his goals. Islamic State holds firm to its belief in the doctrine of *takfir* (pronouncement that a person is an unbeliever (*kafir*) used by Islamic State to sanction violence against all those it deems to be insufficiently religious), in that the Muslim *ummah* must be purged of *murtad* (deviants and unbelievers).²⁷⁰ This belief that the *ummah* must be cleansed of those that do not adhere to the Islamic States ideal of the one true faith has led to widespread brutal, often sectarian, violence. As an overall strategy, Islamic State has followed the guidelines outlined in Abu Bakr Naji’s *Management of Savagery* which advocates a three-phased campaign.²⁷¹ Firstly, is ‘*nikayah*’ a period in which insurgents would wage a terror campaign to compel opposing forces, military and civil to withdraw from an area. The second phase, ‘*tawahhush*’ is a mix of unconventional and conventional warfare designed to foment civil unrest and sectarian violence. The last phase, ‘*tamkin*’ is a

²⁶⁶ Gerges, 10.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Huey.

²⁶⁹ Atwan, 61.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Abu Bakr Naji and William McCants, "The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through Which the Umma Will Pass," (John M Olin Institute for Strategic Studies: Harvard University, 2006).

phase of consolidation, in which the militants take control of an area and establish their authority.²⁷² Al-Zarqawi's approach to *jihad* led to admonishment from *al-Qaeda's* senior leadership, who rebuked al-Zarqawi for his attacks on fellow Muslims.²⁷³

Whilst *al-Qaeda's* central leadership has advocated minimising attacks on fellow Muslims, Islamic State has no such compunctions, and is committed to carrying out sectarian attacks on its co-religionists.²⁷⁴ Before his assassination by the US, bin Laden had begun to express concern at the direction that *al-Qaeda* had taken, worried that the organisation was perceived as nothing more than a terror group and arbiter of extremism. Amongst the notes and papers found in his compound in Abbottabad following his death, were a collection concerning possible name changes for *al-Qaeda*.²⁷⁵ For example, some of the possible name changes under consideration were: *Taifat al-Tawhed wal Jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad Group); *Hizb tawhid al-Umma al-Islamiya* (Islamic National Unification Party) and *Jama'at I'Adat al-Khilafat al-Rashida* (Restoration of the Caliphate Group).²⁷⁶ The proposed new titles were cumbersome, but reflected the ideological direction that bin Laden had wanted *al-Qaeda* to take.²⁷⁷

Sensing its time had come, ISI stepped up its campaign of terror though 2009. A series of attacks were directed at government facilities, embassies and Shia targets.²⁷⁸ The attacks against Iraq's Shia population were targeted and deliberate.²⁷⁹ In a letter

²⁷² Burke, 81.

²⁷³ Mendelson, 122.

²⁷⁴ Burke, 17.

²⁷⁵ Atwan, 63.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Atwan, 65.

²⁷⁹ Michael Griffin, *Islamic State: Rewriting History*, 1st ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 8.

written in 2004 to bin Laden, al-Zarqawi describes Iraq's Shia's as being lurking snakes and malicious scorpions.²⁸⁰ He further stated that by targeting the Shia's religious, political and military symbols, he hoped to foment a civil war between Iraq's Sunni and Shia.²⁸¹ Seeking to reduce Iraq to a state of chaos and fragmentation, ISI conducted a campaign of sectarian cleansing. Political Analyst Michael Griffin states that "al-Zarqawi was effectively proposing that Iraqi Sunnis should rediscover their religious purity through a campaign of collective suicide."²⁸² In scenes reminiscent of the Bosnian conflict, Iraqis divided along sectarian lines. Iraq split amongst the three major groups, Shia in the South, Sunnis in the middle, and Kurds in the North. Whilst this division largely reflected the pre-conflict populations, many of the towns and cities that had mixed populations became sharply divided.²⁸³ Chronic food shortages exacerbated the sectarian divisions, rampant inflation, and the loss of critical infrastructure.²⁸⁴ Lacking a credible government to address these concerns, many Iraqis turned to traditional religious groups for support.

As the violence in Iraq increased, Islamic extremism became an acceptable alternative for Iraq's Sunni.²⁸⁵ With *al-Qaeda's* leadership isolated in the Pakistani hinterland and out of touch with the situation on the ground in Iraq, a generational shift was taking place.²⁸⁶ For many of this new generation of jihadists the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and 9/11 were history. Whilst the veterans of Afghanistan were respected, the new generation bristled against what they saw as the ponderous leadership of the

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid., 9.

²⁸³ Atwan, 65.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

Afghan-Arab veterans.²⁸⁷ Building upon the initial success of *al-Qaeda* central, several franchise groups made their appearance on the global scene. Foremost amongst these, and arguably the most successful of the *al-Qaeda* offshoots, was al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).²⁸⁸ Formed in early 2009 in Yemen, AQAP was closely linked to *al-Qaeda*; its leader, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, also known as Abu Bassir had been bin Laden's private secretary.²⁸⁹ AQAP's rapid rise was the result of a population sympathetic to *al-Qaeda* and of close links to Yemeni tribal groups.²⁹⁰ In a precursor to the Islamic State's sophisticated use of social media, AQAP pioneered the use of social networking. In this respect, AQAP had a significant advantage in the form of Anwar al-Awlaki. Al-Awlaki was a US citizen, born in Yemen but had spent much of his adult life in America.²⁹¹ Well-educated, articulate and a popular Imam, al-Awlaki was sought after as a speaker and commentator.²⁹² Like al-Zarqawi, al-Awlaki had a criminal past (prosecuted for soliciting prostitutes in 1996 and 1997).²⁹³ In both cases, rather than being reviled for their past behaviours, their perceived repentance was seen as an example for Muslim youth who sought a means of redemption for their own indiscretions. Al-Awlaki reached out to Islamic youth through social media platforms and launched *al-Qaeda's Inspire* magazine.²⁹⁴ *Inspire* was a major step beyond previous jihadist propaganda pamphlets. It was glossy well-written and importantly, it was in English. As Scott Shane describes it: "With its breezy style, how-to features, and celebrity promotion, *Inspire* was a dead-on imitation of American consumer magazine rack, *Maxim* for the jihadi set."²⁹⁵ It was this accessibility that gave *al-Qaeda* and later

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 66.

²⁸⁸ Gunaratna and Oreg, 120.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 133.

²⁹⁰ Atwan, 66.

²⁹¹ Shane, 51.

²⁹² Ibid., 145-46.

²⁹³ Ibid., 107-09.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 247-48.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 248.

Islamic State ideologues the ability to spread their message to disaffected Muslims across the globe.²⁹⁶ This digital *jihad* is also exceptionally hard to counter. As one social media platform is shut down another takes its place.

As *al-Qaeda* central's capacity to act was radically reduced in the wake of the US invasion of Afghanistan, other groups rose to prominence. Somalia, a short boat trip across the Arabian Sea from Yemen, was ripe for exploitation by Islamic extremists. Somalia was still suffering the lingering effects of its long civil war and a failed intervention by the US/UN in the early nineties when *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* (Mujahideen Youth Movement (HSM). Somali *Xarakada Mujaahidinta Alshabaab*) more commonly known as *al-Shabaab* rose out of the chaos. Emerging from the Islamic Courts Union (ICU. Somali: *Midowga Maxkamadaha Islaamiga*. Arabic: *Ittihad al-Makahim al-Islamiyyh*), a grouping of *Shari'a* courts that had opposed Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG Somali: *Dowladda Federaalgaarka Kumeelgaarka*), *al-Shabaab* was as brutal as its counterparts.²⁹⁷ Like its Salafist-jihadist counterparts, *al-Shabaab* soon became a drawcard for foreign fighters.²⁹⁸ *Al-Shabaab* demonstrated its international reach when it became associated with the murder of British soldier Lee Rigby in May 2013.²⁹⁹ It also demonstrated its capacity for large scale attacks when *al-Shabaab* operatives laid siege to the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya.³⁰⁰ The attacks by AQAP and *al-Shabaab* demonstrated that large scale atrocities attract global publicity and attracts recruits. *Al-Shabaab*, like its

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 249.

²⁹⁷ James Fergusson, *The World's Most Dangerous Place: Inside the Outlaw State of Somalia*, 1st ed. (London: Transworld Publishers, 2013), 65.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Vikram Dodd and Josh Halliday, "Lee Rigby Killing: Two British Muslim Converts Convicted of Murder," *The Guardian* 2013.

³⁰⁰ Tristan McConnell, "Close Your Eyes and Pretend to Be Dead What Really Happened Two Years Ago in the Bloody Attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall," *Foreign Policy* <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/20/nairobi-kenya-westgate-mall-attack-al-shabab/>.

Yemeni counterpart, utilised media platforms to do so, establishing its own satellite TV channel, *al-Kataib*.³⁰¹ It was aided in doing so by such prominent Western recruits such as the American jihadist Omar Hammami (also known as Abu Mansoor Al-Amriki).³⁰² Hammami was well known for his recruiting videos, in which he frequently rapped.³⁰³ *Al-Shabaab*'s twitter feeds and YouTube posts both threatened and joked with Western analysts and journalists.³⁰⁴ *Al-Shabaab* also introduced a new lexicon into jihadist propaganda, using Western colloquialisms and street talk. This appeal to the "Thug Life" or brotherhood of the street, has been one that ISIS would exploit.³⁰⁵ The eruption of widespread dissent and protest in what was to become the known as the Arab Spring in early 2011, would further the generational division amongst the Salafist-jihadists.

After decades of single party rule, the removal of long-term autocrats such as Tunisia's President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, left a political vacuum waiting to be filled.³⁰⁶ For the most part the only political movements that were positioned to step into the void, were the Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.³⁰⁷ The Salafist-jihadists were unprepared with the Arab Spring taking the leadership of *al-Qaeda* and ISI, along with the rest of the world, by surprise.³⁰⁸ Neither bin Laden nor his deputy al-Zawahiri commented on the Tunisian uprising and the Egyptian overthrow of Hosni Mubarak failed to elicit a response from *al-Qaeda*.³⁰⁹ It was more than a week before *al-Qaeda* issued a statement on the Egyptian rebellion,

³⁰¹ Aaron Y Zelin, "Al-Katāi'b Media: New News Reports from Ḥarakat Al-Shabāb Al-Mujāhidīn," Jihadology, <http://jihadology.net/category/al-kataib-media/>.

³⁰² Fergusson, 309.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Spencer Ackerman, "Theres No Turning Back: My Interview with a Hunted American Jihadist," Wired Magazine, <https://www.wired.com/2013/04/omar-hammami/>.

³⁰⁵ Atwan, 68.

³⁰⁶ Griffin, 39.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Atwan, 69.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 70.

and even then, the speech delivered by al-Zawahiri failed to mention the deposed Egyptian leader.³¹⁰ In comparison to *al-Qaeda* dry, tedious, history lectures, ISI statements on the Arab Spring were full of revolutionary zeal. ISI warned against replacing authoritarian governments with secular ones and “infidel democracy”.³¹¹ The slow cautious response of *al-Qaeda* reflected an organisation that was increasing irrelevant to a new generation of jihadists, brought up on a diet of instant social media gratification.

Al-Qaeda's relevance took a further step backwards when, in May 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed. In a night time raid on bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad Pakistan, a team of US Navy SEAL's (Sea Air and Land Teams, US Special Operation Force) stormed the compound and killed bin Laden, his chief courier, and his son-in-law.³¹² Revered by the jihadist community, bin Laden's death created a period of much uncertainty. Ayman al-Zawahiri, as bin Laden's deputy, should have been the obvious choice as successor. However, it has been reported that al-Zawahiri's succession was fiercely debated by *al-Qaeda*'s senior members; it took more than a month before his appointment as leader was confirmed.³¹³ Noted as being severe and difficult, al-Zawahiri was generally considered as lacking bin Laden's charisma. Al-Zawahiri, who had always counselled against infighting, now found himself as the central player in jihadist division. Many, including bin Laden's personal bodyguard Nasser al-Bahri, felt that al-Zawahiri lacked the “personal qualities” for leadership.³¹⁴ It wasn't until 2011,

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Mark Owen and Kevin Maurer, *No Easy Day: The Autobiography of a Navy Seal*, 1st ed. (New York: Dutton, 2012), 233-37.

³¹³ Atwan, 71.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 72.

and after much debate, that ISI spokesman Abu Muhammed al-Adnani issued a statement acknowledging al-Zawahiri's accession to emir of *al-Qaeda*.³¹⁵

In 2011, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, then a senior member of ISI, to establish a Salafist-jihadist group in Syria. In late January, the group officially announced itself as *Jabhat al-Nusra*. This was a strategic decision made by both al-Baghdadi and al-Zawahiri before the split between the two.³¹⁶ To ensure that the Syrian rebels and potential recruits were not alienated, the links between *al-Nusra*, ISI and *al-Qaeda* were deliberately obscured.³¹⁷ The decision to obscure the relationship between *al-Qaeda* and *Jabhat al-Nusra* was an intriguing one, particularly as around the same time *al-Qaeda* had acknowledged *al-Shabaab* as its official Somali affiliate.³¹⁸ The decision to create an *al-Qaeda* affiliate in Syria was set against the background of the Arab Spring and in a period in which al-Zawahiri had just taken leadership of *al-Qaeda*.³¹⁹ For *al-Qaeda*, involvement in Syria was important in order to ensure the organisation's continued relevance and to cement the leadership of al-Zawahiri.³²⁰

Al-Qaeda's dilemma was twofold; given that the Syrian conflict was garnering attention from the West and widespread media coverage, *al-Qaeda* could not afford to stay away from the Syrian conflict.³²¹ Due to the behaviour of its Iraqi affiliate, *al-Qaeda*'s brand had degraded to the point that overt involvement could put external support for the uprising at risk and draw a backlash from other rebel groups in Syria.³²²

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Mendelson, 168.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid., 169.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid.

Jabhat al-Nusra was established in mid-2011, according to al-Joulani this was at the behest of a small group of mainly Syrian ISI operatives. Indeed, it has been a feature of *Jabhat al-Nusra* to empathise its nature as a Syrian entity.³²³ Building upon the support network already established in Syria by ISI, *al-Nusra* was quick to consolidate its position in Syria.³²⁴ It quickly assumed the role of providing socio-judicial functions, established itself as an effective fighting group, and launched attacks against the Syrian regime.³²⁵

Al-Nusra differed from the other *al-Qaeda* affiliates in its continued denial of its relationship with *al-Qaeda*, although this was widely understood by the other actors in the Syrian conflict.³²⁶ The other significant aspect of *al-Nusra*'s approach in Syria was its relationship with the other rebel groups.³²⁷ From its establishment, *al-Nusra* has sought to avoid conflict with other anti-regime elements, not just other Islamist groups, but also with secular forces.³²⁸ Although both *al-Nusra* and the Islamic State desire the establishment of a Caliphate, *al-Nusra* has concentrated on achieving battlefield success, rather than seizing territory.³²⁹ In many respects, *al-Nusra*'s actions in Syria reflected a more pragmatic approach on behalf of *al-Qaeda*.³³⁰ The group augmented its military role, through the provision of social services. In conjunction with other rebel groups, *al-Nusra* set up *Shari'a* Committees, which were responsible for the distribution of food and clothing, as well as ensuring the maintenance of basic infrastructure,

³²³ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, 1st ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 133.

³²⁴ Daniel Byman, *Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 167.

³²⁵ Mendelson, 171.

³²⁶ Phillips, 133.

³²⁷ Byman, 169.

³²⁸ Mendelson, 171.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

³³⁰ Mendelson, 172.

including electricity and water.³³¹ Learning from the mistakes of other *al-Qaeda* affiliates, *al-Nusra* was careful not to exceed the limits of its legitimacy.³³² Unlike the Islamic State, who sought to impose their beliefs on the population once it gained control of a region, *al-Nusra* sought to gain popular legitimacy.³³³ Although both groups took responsibility for policing and security for all of the population under their control, *al-Nusra* largely avoided the imposition of the harsh punishments (*hudud*) that their beliefs about appropriate Islamic behaviour required.³³⁴ *Al-Nusra* took the approach that the people must be educated about the requirements of *Shari'a*, before punishments could be implemented.³³⁵ Increasingly, *al-Nusra* showed its independence from ISI, developing its own networks and attracting its own donors from within the region.³³⁶

In early 2013, al-Baghdadi announced that ISI and *al-Nusra* would merge to form what would be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).³³⁷ Seth Jones of Rand Corporation has suggested this, was because ISI leadership felt threatened by *al-Nusra*'s growing independence.³³⁸ The statement announcing the merger did more than outing *al-Nusra*, it was a shot across the bow of *al-Qaeda*, which established ISIS as a competitor.³³⁹ Both *al-Qaeda* and Islamic State are competing to be the leaders of the modern *jihad* movement.³⁴⁰ Al-Joulani refused the merger, and instead confirmed his group's allegiance to al-Zawahiri and *al-Qaeda*.³⁴¹ This came at a

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Maher, 211.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Mendelson, 173.

³³⁷ Atwan, 73.

³³⁸ Mendelson, 173.

³³⁹ Ibid., 174.

³⁴⁰ Byman, 169.

³⁴¹ Mendelson, 174.

cost in manpower as some of *al-Nusra*'s fighters, mainly its foreign fighters, defected to ISIS.³⁴² The split on the ground between ISIS and *al-Nusra* was a reflection on the ideological schism between the older generation of Salafist jihadists represented by *al-Qaeda* and the newer ISIS generation. Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi now posed a challenge to al-Zawahiri's leadership of the global Salafist-jihadist movement.³⁴³ The change in name also reflected both the group's success, and its long-term ambitions.³⁴⁴ Other groups within Syria were critical of al-Baghdadi's proclamation, and were wary that the actions of ISIS would attract the attention of global powers, especially America.³⁴⁵

The largest Islamist group in Syria, *Ahrar al-Sham* (*Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya*, Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant), rejected the idea of establishing a Caliphate. *Ahrar al-Sham* argued that the conditions for declaring a Caliphate were not present in Syria.³⁴⁶ The group stated that the purpose of announcing a caliphate was to unify the rebels but this was not al-Baghdadi's intention. Although Salafist-jihadist in ideology, *Ahrar al-Sham* adhered more to the ideas of *al-Qaeda*'s forefather Abdullah Azzam, in that the group's preference was to wage jihad within the Syrian national context.³⁴⁷ *Ahrar al-Sham*'s leadership were highly critical of al-Baghdadi's failure to consult the rebel factions on the declaration of a Caliphate.³⁴⁸ *Ahrar al-Sham*'s leadership stated that their fight was against the al-Assad regime and nothing more.³⁴⁹ Although *Ahrar al-Sham* was critical of the leadership of ISIS, little criticism was directed towards al-Joulani and *al-Nusra*, despite *al-Nusra* being revealed

³⁴² Atwan, 73.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Mendelson, 174.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 175.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Lister, 146.

³⁴⁸ Mendelson, 175.

³⁴⁹ Lister, 146.

as a branch of *al-Qaeda*.³⁵⁰ However, *Ahrar al-Sham*'s leadership remained wary of *al-Nusra*'s ties to *al-Qaeda*. The group's leader Hashem al-Sheikh, in an April 2015 *al-Jazeera* interview, stated that *al-Nusra*'s link to *al-Qaeda* posed a danger to the Syrian people.³⁵¹ However, many rebel groups continued to express appreciation for *al-Nusra*'s efforts in Syria, and pledged to continue to work with the group.³⁵² Confronted with such a direct challenge to his leadership, al-Zawahiri issued an edict to both groups. In hiding and isolated from the front line, he however lacked the ability to wield effective command and control over *al-Qaeda*'s wayward affiliates.³⁵³

Al-Zawahiri attempted to mediate the conflict addressing both groups' Shura Councils by appointing *Ahrar al-Sham*'s Abu Khalid al-Suri as his personal emissary.³⁵⁴ Al-Zawahiri also used other trusted Islamists on the ground and sought to negotiate the differences between the groups. These mediators included such Salafist-jihadist notables as the Saudi cleric Abdullah bin Muhammad al-Muhaysini and the Australian national Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, as *al-Nusra*'s representative.³⁵⁵ The negotiations were a failure, mainly due to ISIS no longer recognising al-Zawahiri's and *al-Qaeda*'s primacy as the leader of the global Salafist-jihadist movement. In April 2014, al-Adnani issued a statement to this effect, that *al-Qaeda* was no longer the seat of true *jihad*, that its leadership had deviated from the path of true *jihad*, that *al-Qaeda* was compromising the Islamic faith by catering to the whims of the masses.³⁵⁶ Al-Zawahiri had ordered al-Baghdadi to withdraw ISIS forces from Syria and to concentrate ISIS in Iraq. Al-

³⁵⁰ Mendelson, 175.

³⁵¹ Lister, 343.

³⁵² Mendelson, 175.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ Atwan, 74.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Baghdadi refused to obey. Through ISIS's official spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the group gave five reasons for the rejection of al-Zawahiri's efforts.³⁵⁷ Firstly, al-Adnani said ISIS could not comply, because this would mean dividing the group in two, leading to competition for resources.³⁵⁸ Secondly, al-Adnani argued that *al-Nusra* was never an independent organisation and that it had always been a subordinate to ISIS.³⁵⁹ The third aspect was that al-Zawahiri's judgement was deemed illegitimate. Al-Adnani argued that as the groups had not been presented with the evidence that informed the judgement, and because they had not had the opportunity to respond, it therefore could not be a just decree.³⁶⁰ Fourthly, the withdrawal of ISIS forces from Syria was not feasible, and was considered morally inappropriate.³⁶¹ Lastly, and in line with the previous objection, was that al-Zawahiri's decision should be rejected as it was based upon the division of the countries according to the lines drawn by Sykes-Picot.³⁶² The imposition of colonial borders, being seen as a means to divide the Muslim *ummah*.³⁶³

In line with this hardening of al-Baghdadi's position, was a rise in ISIS extremism. ISIS was quickly becoming more violent and intolerant towards other sectarian groups, denying even the legitimacy of its own co-religionists.³⁶⁴ Islamic State literally seeks to build a state. It has established an army and has built a state like infrastructure within the territory it controls.³⁶⁵ In line with its motto *baqiya wa*

³⁵⁷ Mendelson, 177.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 178.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Atwan, 73.

³⁶⁵ Byman, 170.

tatamadad (lasting and expanding), Islamic state has sought to expand.³⁶⁶ ISIS moved to consolidate its position in Syria, seizing territory and equipment from *al-Nusra* and other rebel groups in Syria. This led the Syrian rebel groups to declare war on ISIS in 2014.³⁶⁷ A coalition of three rebel groups including the Syrian Nationalist Front (SNF), the Islamist *Jaish al-Mujahideen* (Army of Mujahideen), and the Salafist Islamic Front, launched attacks against ISIS, routing them from positions in northern Syria.³⁶⁸

As ISIS consolidated its position and battled against the Syrian rebel groups, the violence committed by ISIS and its sectarian stance against fellow Muslims led to *al-Qaeda* distancing itself from the group. In 2014, al-Zawahiri issued a statement disavowing ISIS and *al-Qaeda*'s relationship to the group. The statement, issued on 2 February 2014, announced that *al-Qaeda* had severed all links to ISIS, and that *al-Qaeda*'s leadership no longer viewed ISIS as being an affiliate.³⁶⁹ ISIS spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, responded by stating that should al-Zawahiri visit ISIS territories he had to swear *Bayat* (oath of allegiance) to al-Baghdadi as emir of the Islamic State.³⁷⁰ To this end ISIS actively hindered groups fighting the Assad regime in Syria, unless they gave their support to ISIS. Syria's rebel forces were according to Brian H. Fishman, "tremendously disorganized".³⁷¹ The rebels espoused a wide range of ideological and political beliefs, and lacked the ability to provide a co-ordinated resistance.³⁷² Whilst the factionalism made it difficult for the al-Assad regime to subdue

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Mendelson, 181.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 182.

³⁷⁰ Atwan, 74.

³⁷¹ Fishman, 170.

³⁷² Ibid.

the uprising, it also meant that the rebels were unable to deliver a decisive blow to the regime.³⁷³

For ISIS, the rebel's disorganisation was an opportunity to become the dominant group in Syria, regardless of its numbers or influence. ISIS strategy also differed from the rebel groups, as ISIS focused on the seizing control of Sunni dominated eastern Syria.³⁷⁴ Because ISIS' primary aim was the establishment of a Caliphate, it fought against any force that stood in the way, rebel or Syrian regime.³⁷⁵ Further afield, ISIS called for *al-Qaeda* affiliates to end their support for *al-Qaeda* and instead swear their allegiance to al-Baghdadi and ISIS.³⁷⁶ Many of the *al-Qaeda* affiliates swiftly did so, with *al-Qaeda* in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) publishing a statement through its media front *al-Manbar*, announcing its support for ISIS.³⁷⁷ The group declared that:

We announce solidarity with our Muslim brothers in Iraq against the crusade. Their blood and injuries are ours and we will surely support them...We assert to the Islamic Nation [all Muslims worldwide] that we stand by the side of our Muslim brothers in Iraq against the American and Iranian conspiracy and their agents of the apostate Gulf rulers.³⁷⁸

This was a surprising move by the Yemeni based group as its leader, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, had been bin Laden's private secretary and was close to al-Zawahiri.³⁷⁹

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 180.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Atwan, 74.

³⁷⁷ Ali Ibrahim Al-Moshki, "Aqap Announces Support for Isil," Yemen Times Online, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1808/news/4216/AQAP-announces-support-for-ISIL.htm>.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Atwan, 75.

Additionally in late 2014, Sheikh Makmun Hatim, using a AQAP linked twitter account, advocated a merger of the two groups to form the Islamic State of Iraq, al-Sham and the Arabian Peninsula.³⁸⁰ AQAP's oath was quickly accepted by Islamic States Caliph Ibrahim Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who confirmed Islamic State's expansion into Yemen on 13 November 2014.³⁸¹ As Elisabeth Kendall points out, it is difficult to assess how wide the support for Islamic State truly is within the ranks of AQAP, as the oath was later repudiated by others within AQAP's leadership.³⁸² The uncertainty around the group's allegiance is a reflection of the wider debate within Salafist-jihadists as to the correct path to achieve their goals.

The Islamic State's influence continued to spread across the wider Middle East and into North Africa.³⁸³ In February 2014, Libyan group *Ansar al-Shari'a* (Supporters of Islamic Law) posted video footage of an Islamic State convoy arriving into Benghazi.³⁸⁴ Other Islamist groups in Libya also swore allegiance to ISIS and declared an Islamic State in Cyrenica Province in Eastern Libya. By the end of 2014, the Libyan cities of Benghazi, Derna, Sirte and Tobruk had fallen under the sway of Islamic State.³⁸⁵ In the Sinai Peninsula, the local Islamist group, *Ansar Bayat al-Maqdis* (Supporters of the Holy House) swore their allegiance to al-Baghdadi and Islamic State, and later changed their name to Islamic State in the Sinai Peninsula.³⁸⁶ Pakistani group *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan* (Taliban Movement of Pakistan, not to be confused with the

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Elisabeth Kendall, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Yemen: A Battle for Local Audiences," in *Jihadism Transformed: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's Global Battle of Ideas*, ed. Simon Staffell and Akil N Awan (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 89.

³⁸² Ibid., 104.

³⁸³ Eric Schmitt, "Warnings of a 'Powder Keg' in Libya as Isis Regroups," New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/world/africa/libya-isis.html?_r=0.

³⁸⁴ Atwan, 75.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Stanford University, "The Islamic State - Sinai Province," Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/557>.

Afghan Taliban) was initially ambivalent towards the infighting between Islamic State and *al-Qaeda* but by late 2014 had pledged its support to Islamic State.³⁸⁷ Nigerian group *Boko Haram* (Western education is forbidden) declared its allegiance to Islamic State in March 2015.³⁸⁸ *Boko Haram* leader Abubakar Shekau pledged his loyalty to Islamic State in a video declaring: "We announce our allegiance to the caliph ... and will hear and obey in times of difficulty and prosperity... We call on Muslims everywhere to pledge allegiance to the caliph."³⁸⁹ By January 2015, Islamic State had announced the establishment of a new *wilayah* (province) covering Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁹⁰ However, other Salafist-jihadist groups remained wary of Islamic State's expansion. Abdelmalek Droukdel, the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, *Tanzim al-Qa'idah fi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami*) rejected the leadership of Islamic State and reaffirmed his support of al-Zawahiri and *al-Qaeda*.³⁹¹ Although AQIM has reaffirmed its loyalty to *al-Qaeda*, some members of the group have expressed their support of the actions of Islamic State, and others have called for *al-Qaeda* and Islamic State to reconcile their differences.³⁹² Mokhtar Belmokhtar and his group *al-Murabitun* (The Sentinels) also reaffirmed their support for *al-Qaeda*.³⁹³ Both Afghanistan's *Taliban* and Somalia's *al-Shabaab* have called for reconciliation and unity. Whilst both have confirmed their support for *al-Qaeda*, neither has issued outright condemnation of al-

³⁸⁷ Atwan, 76.

³⁸⁸ Virginia Comolli, "Boko Haram and Islamic State," in *Jihadism Transformed: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's Global Battle of Ideas*, ed. Simon Staffell and Akil N Awan (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 129.

³⁸⁹ Adam Chandler, "The Islamic State of Boko Haram? The Terrorist Group Has Pledged Its Allegiance to Isis. But What Does That Really Mean?," *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/boko-haram-pledges-allegiance-islamic-state/387235/>.

³⁹⁰ Harleen Gambhir, "Isis in Afghanistan," (United States: Institute for the Study of War, 2015).

³⁹¹ Atwan, 76.

³⁹² Valentina Bartolucci, "Inside the Propoganda Machine of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Its Evolution Following the Rise of the Islamic State," in *Jihadism Transformed: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's Global Battle of Ideas*, ed. Simon Staffell and Akil N Awan (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 121.

³⁹³ Atwan, 76.

Baghdadi and ISIS. This indicates that some of the major Salafist-jihadist groups are willing to bid their time before announcing their position either way.³⁹⁴

As we have seen al-Zarqawi was able to use the existing *al-Qaeda* networks to establish his organisation. However, the differences between the two groups soon became apparent and would lead AQI breaking away from *al-Qaeda*. Islamic State and its predecessors have burnt fast and bright, whilst *al-Qaeda* has taken a slower more methodical approach. This reflects each group's respective leadership and recruitment policies. *Al-Qaeda*'s leadership was older, more experienced and better educated, whereas ISI were younger, more aggressive and less selective in whom they recruited. ISI/Islamic State was also more encouraging of sectarian divisions and willing to target anyone it viewed as *takfir*; the group was ruthless purging its territory of anyone deemed as *murtad*. Islamic State built upon and exceeded *al-Qaeda*'s use of social media and recruiting tools, using modern social media and slick media presentations to reach more recruits. Dramatic visuals and music mark Islamic State propaganda and stands in marked contrast to *al-Qaeda*'s dry lectures. The death of Osama bin Laden also reduced the appeal of *al-Qaeda* to a new generation of Salafist-jihadists. As Islamic State grew in power and stature many other Salafist-jihadists, hoping to piggy back on Islamic States infamy and access its resources, switched allegiances from *al-Qaeda*. This in turn strengthen Islamic States position and stature, giving credence to its claims of a Caliphate

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 78.

Syria: A Hurricane Blows

Islamic State is Iraqi in origin, but it is in Syria that it was able to expand and grow. Like in Iraq, Syria has long been controlled by a Ba'athist regime and similarly political Islam has long been a feature. This chapter aims to explore the conditions within Syria that contributed to the growth and expansion of the Islamic State within the region. It traces the initial responses of the al-Assad regime to the protests of 2011 and how the Syrian regime sought to repress and exploit the uprising for its own ends.

Syria has a smaller population than Iraq; with a population of some 18 million, 90 percent of Syrians are ethnically Arab, with the rest made up of smaller minorities such as Kurds.³⁹⁵ Whilst almost homogeneously an Arab state Syria's religious mix is more diverse. 74 percent of the population are Sunni, Shia, Alawi and Ismaili make up around 13 percent of population.³⁹⁶ The remainder are Christian and a further 3 percent are Druze.³⁹⁷ Prior to the 2011 uprisings, Syria had been a stable country. However, the uprising unleashed a wave of previously suppressed grievances. The military terrain of Syria frequently follows its religious and ethnic geography.³⁹⁸ As it had in Iraq, ISIS and later Islamic State exploited the unrest in Syria for its own ends. It used the political chaos and violence to create a gap in which it could embed itself in Syria.

The trigger for the Syrian uprisings was the arrest and torture of group of students on 11 March 2011 in the city of Dara'a, after they were caught writing anti-

³⁹⁵ Mabon and Royle, 19.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 307.

regime graffiti.³⁹⁹ The regime of Bashar al-Assad did not hesitate in resorting to brutality in its efforts to suppress the uprising. Al-Assad's forces cut off all infrastructure within the city, as Syrian special forces went door to door. By the end of the 10-day operation more than 200 civilians had been killed, along with some 81 soldiers who had, bravely, refused their orders.⁴⁰⁰ Many more were detained by the security services, only to disappear within Syria's prison systems; photos obtained by the families in order to gain death certificates, showed evidence of systemic and prolonged torture.⁴⁰¹ As Lawrence Wright notes: "Repression is the way that governments routinely attempt to stamp out terror organizations, but it requires a rapacity and persistence that democratic countries find difficult to sustain."⁴⁰² On 29 July 2011, the city of Hama was subjected to the same treatment that Dara'a had received, with over 100 civilians killed in the first day of the siege.⁴⁰³ By the beginning of August, this number had doubled.⁴⁰⁴ Al-Assad was aided in his efforts as in-fighting was rife amongst the opposition forces.

The arrival of the Salafist-jihadist groups, first *al-Nusra* and later ISIS, was the tipping point to plunge Syria into chaos.⁴⁰⁵ In short order, the modern state of Syria had become a cesspit of sectarian violence and a battlefield for the proxy wars of regional and international powers.

For the Salafist-jihadists Syria, like Iraq, also had great symbolic value. Syria had been the seat of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 C.E.) and is said to be the region

³⁹⁹ Griffin, 44.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁰² Wright, 345.

⁴⁰³ Griffin, 48.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Atwan, 79.

in which the battles of the Day of Judgement will occur.⁴⁰⁶ At its height the Umayyad Caliphate stretched from the Caucasus across the Middle East and encapsulated the Iberian Peninsula, more than 13 million kilometres.⁴⁰⁷ It is this kind of success that Islamic State's membership envisions. Strategically, Syria's geographic location is also vital. By basing themselves in Syria, Islamic State has avenues into the surrounding countries of Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Additionally, the porous border between Iraq and Syria allows for the easy transfer of men and materiel. Syria like its Iraqi counterpart had long been dominated by the Ba'ath party, which had controlled the Syrian state since seizing power in 1963.

The al-Assad family has ruled Syria since 1970, when Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez first took power and control of the Syrian Ba'ath party. In common with the other Arab dictators of the time, Hafez exploited sectarian and tribal linkages to ensure his rule, and as a part his consolidation of power.⁴⁰⁸ Like his Ba'athist cohort, Saddam Hussein, al-Assad understood how Islam could be exploited for political gain. The 1979 Iranian revolution shook the foundations of the Arab Islamic world. For secular autocracies, such as al-Assad's Ba'athist regime, the wave of Islamic unrest inspired by the Iranian revolution was a thing to be both exploited and feared. Hafez al-Assad thus empathised that Syria was an Islamic country, whilst ruthlessly exterminating any Islamic or secular uprising.⁴⁰⁹ Indeed it was because of an Islamist group that Hafez al-Assad experienced his only serious internal challenge to his rule.⁴¹⁰ During the period

⁴⁰⁶ Mendelson, 170.

⁴⁰⁷ Moubayed, 6.

⁴⁰⁸ Dawn Chatty, "Bedouin Tribes in Contemporary Syria: Alternative Perceptions of Authority, Management, and Control," in *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, ed. Uzi Rabi (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 163.

⁴⁰⁹ Atwan, 81.

⁴¹⁰ Chatty, 164.

1979 -81, the Muslim Brotherhood launched an insurgency aimed at the overthrow of Hafez al-Assad.⁴¹¹ The Aleppo-Hama region (along with its strategic geographical location) was the seat of Islamist rebellion by the Muslim Brotherhood. This has contributed to the reason for Aleppo being the target of Syrian government aggression in the current conflict. Out of the breakaway faction in Aleppo-Hama rose the Fighting Vanguard (*al-Talia al-Muqatila*).⁴¹² Led by Marwan al-Hadid, who had been trained by the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation, *Munazzamat at-Tahrir al-Filastiniyyah*), the group had cells in Damascus, Aleppo and fatefully Hama. Headquartered in Jordan, and effectively the Muslim Brotherhood's military wing, the Fighting Vanguard targeted the regime and members of the Alawite community.⁴¹³ On 26 June 1980, members of the Fighting Vanguard attempted to assassinate Hafez al-Assad. Retaliation was swift and brutal, with regime security forces gunning down some 1,200 Islamist prisoners in Tadmour prison.⁴¹⁴ This was shortly followed in July by a decree outlawing the Muslim Brotherhood, membership of which was now punishable by death.⁴¹⁵

This did little to quell the insurrection, which entered a period of direct attacks and car bombings against government, military and security installations.⁴¹⁶ The insurgency peaked when the Fighting Vanguard seized control of Hama in February 1982.⁴¹⁷ Hafez's Ba'athist regime responded with ruthless brutality, directing artillery fires into the city for a period of three weeks.⁴¹⁸ The massacre is estimated to have

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Moubayed, 34.

⁴¹³ Atwan, 84.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Moubayed, 39.

⁴¹⁸ Atwan, 84.

killed as few as 3,000 and as many as 30,000.⁴¹⁹ The al-Assad regime laid responsibility for the massacre at the door of the Muslim Brotherhood; the ruthlessness of the Syrian security forces ensured that support for the Brotherhood was severely eroded.⁴²⁰ Syrian's would only refer to the massacre as "what happened in Hama", such was the fear of the regime.⁴²¹ Both *Jabhat al-Nusra* and Islamic State, used the history of Hama for their own purposes. In 2014, *al-Nusra* launched an attack to capture Hama from the regime. Whilst it failed in its attempt to do so, the rural areas would become a hotbed of support for *al-Nusra*.⁴²² Although to a lesser extent than *al-Nusra*, Islamic State too claimed to link between its conflict and Syria's Islamist past.⁴²³ After its capture of the Syrian city of Palmyra, ISIS forces proudly showed off their destruction of the notorious Tadmour military prison, in which thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood had been incarcerated.⁴²⁴

When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000 after a long period of illness, his son Bashar was appointed as Hafez's successor. Western leaders had hoped that the Western educated Bashar would lead to a more open, liberal Syria.⁴²⁵ At the beginning of his rule, Bashar gave some hope to this idea. In the early part of his presidency, Bashar took some steps to open Syria's political environment. During a period known as the Damascus Spring, Bashar authorised the release of many political prisoners, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴²⁶ However, when the Muslim Brotherhood's London based leadership called for more reforms, Bashar quickly revoked his

⁴¹⁹ Chatty, 164.

⁴²⁰ Moubayed, 40.

⁴²¹ Francesca Borri, *Syrian Dust: Reporting Form the Heart of the Battle for Aleppo*, 1st ed. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2016), 98.

⁴²² Moubayed, 41.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Warrick, 225.

⁴²⁶ Atwan, 82.

previously given freedoms and instituted a crackdown on the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.⁴²⁷ After the Muslim Brotherhood was banned and its leadership sent into exile, many of its members scattered across the region.⁴²⁸ Amongst these scattered members was Mustafa bin Abdul Qadir Set Marriam. Marriam is better known as Abu Musab al-Suri, whose many treatises on tactics and warfare has positioned him as one of *al-Qaeda*'s foremost strategists and thinkers. Al-Suri's writings and teachings have influenced many Salafist-jihadists, not least of whom was AQIs Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.⁴²⁹ Syrian jihadists have a long association with *al-Qaeda* and have featured prominently in *al-Qaeda* affiliates in Bosnia, Chechnya and in Afghanistan. Amongst those who fought alongside al-Zarqawi in Afghanistan was *al-Nusra*'s future emir, Abu Mohammad al-Joulani.⁴³⁰ Al-Joulani was amongst the Syrian jihadists who aided al-Zarqawi in establishing his network in northern Iraq.⁴³¹ These Afghan veterans helped establish sleeper cells, safe houses and trafficking lanes in Syria and Lebanon. As the insurgency in Iraq reached its peak, these links proved invaluable for smuggling weapons and fighters into Iraq, and later into Syria.⁴³² The Iraqi insurgency proved invaluable in establishing the personal and jihadist credentials of those who assumed leadership of the Salafist-jihadist groups involved in the Syrian uprising. Both Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Mohammad al-Jolani were, along with thousands of other jihadis and former Ba'athists, imprisoned in Camp Bucca (Camp Bucca was a US run detention facility near Umm Qasr in Iraq from 2003-2009).⁴³³ It was in Camp Bucca, that the pair burnished their credentials as future leaders of the jihad.⁴³⁴ Members of the Islamic

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 86.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Hosken, 161.

⁴³² Atwan, 86.

⁴³³ Ibid., 87.

⁴³⁴ Griffin, 5.

State have described the camp as having provided them with a secure facility in which to organise and discuss jihadist ideology.⁴³⁵ Despite his confinement, al-Baghdadi formed the networks amongst the former Ba'athist military and intelligence officers who later planned and executed the campaigns that led to the rapid expansion of ISI and which later rebranded itself as Islamic State.⁴³⁶ The later rebranding as Islamic State would be an important step for the group. By rebranding itself, the group was fulfilling its aim of building a Caliphate that would encompass eventually not just the Muslims of Iraq and Syria, but all Muslims. For Islamic State, it would be a key factor in marketing itself as an alternative to *al-Qaeda*.

Across the Middle East and North Africa many of the revolutions of the Arab Spring, quickly deposed the ruling authoritarian governments. However, whilst Tunisia transitioned relatively peacefully, Libya collapsed into a civil war, and Egypt after a brief period of Islamist rule returned to military dictatorship.⁴³⁷ It was always unlikely that the al-Assad government would be peacefully unseated.⁴³⁸ The al-Assad government's reaction to the uprising was marked by characteristic brutality. The spark for the revolution was the arrest and torture of 15 students for political graffiti on 15 March 2011. Protests spread across Syria's cities, people held demonstrations in Banyas, Homs and in Damascus, the security crackdown led to many arrests and dozens of deaths.⁴³⁹ Over the following week, the protests and security crackdown grew in proportion to each other. As the protests expanded, the protestors grew more daring and took direct action against the edifices of the state. On 20 March 2011, protestors burnt

⁴³⁵ Hashim, 164.

⁴³⁶ Griffin, 5.

⁴³⁷ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and Its Jihadi Legacy*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 175.

⁴³⁸ Atwan, 90.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

the Ba'ath party headquarters down in the city of Deraa.⁴⁴⁰ By 25 March, the protests had transformed into national unrest. Anyone who was suspected of being involved in the political unrest was arrested and detained by the security forces.⁴⁴¹ Blockades were put in place to prevent the protestors from moving between cities and massing in groups.⁴⁴² Bashar tried to quell the uprising by lifting the 48 year-old state of emergency and releasing large numbers of political prisoners amongst whom were many known Islamist extremists.⁴⁴³ Some observers have suggested that this was a cynical ploy by al-Assad, who aimed to drive a wedge amongst the rebels.⁴⁴⁴

Lasting until October 2011, and overseen by the Directorate of General Security, the release program ensured that only carefully selected prisoners were released.⁴⁴⁵ Advocates for human rights and democracy remained imprisoned, whilst Islamic radicals went free.⁴⁴⁶ Al-Assad proclaimed to the world that the regime was fighting *al-Qaeda*, but cynically encouraged the very thing he claimed to be fighting against.⁴⁴⁷ These steps did little to ease the levels of protest, which had become more vocal in their calls for change. The exacerbation of tension led to greater state repression. An example was the city of Deraa, which became the focal point for the uprising. Bashar deployed some 6,000 troops to the city.⁴⁴⁸ The soldiers then laid siege to Deraa, cutting off food, water, phone lines, and electricity. House to house clearances were conducted, with many arrested, but the siege did little to stop the uprising. By the end of June, the

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Henin, 16.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Henin, 17.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *Isis: Inside the Army of Terror*, 2nd ed. (New York: Regan Arts, 2016), 128.

⁴⁴⁸ Atwan, 91.

wealthy and conservative middle class had risen in protest in the city of Aleppo. Unlike in Egypt, where the armed forces had initially sided with the protestors, Syria's military remained loyal to the regime due to their tribal and familial ties with al-Assad. Those few who did defect to the protestors formed the core of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).⁴⁴⁹ Syria quickly fell into outright civil war. By early 2015 some 300,000 Syrians had been killed, and many millions had fled, becoming refugees.⁴⁵⁰

The international reaction to the Syrian uprising was muted. Although the Syrian rebels had hoped for an early intervention by Western powers, they were disappointed by the inaction of the West.⁴⁵¹ The major western powers such as the US, Britain and France were ambivalent about the rebels, but still wished to see al-Assad toppled.⁴⁵² Unlike in Libya, where Western forces had aided the rebels in 2011, the regime of al-Assad still retained powerful allies in Russia, China, Iran, and locally in *Hezbollah*.⁴⁵³ China has continued its policy of non-interference. Russia caught out by the intervention in Libya, and emboldened by its invasion of the Ukraine, and annexation of Crimea, was vigorously attempting to reassert itself as an international power.⁴⁵⁴ Additionally, Russia had long been an ally of Syria, maintaining a naval base in Tartus, Russia's only military base outside the former Soviet Union and one of only a handful of warm water ports available to the Russian navy.⁴⁵⁵ Russia's support had primarily been diplomatic, but it soon began supplying trainers and advisors, along with logistical support.⁴⁵⁶ This gradually morphed into full-blown military intervention.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁵² Phillips, 142.

⁴⁵³ Atwan, 92.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Kilcullen, *Blood Year: Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror*, 70.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 71.

Iran and *Hezbollah* supported the al-Assad regime for political and sectarian reasons.⁴⁵⁷ The relationship between Iran, *Hezbollah* and Syria is complex. Iran and *Hezbollah* had long used Syria as a conduit for funds and arms, and Hafez al-Assad had used Lebanon's Shia to legitimise his governments religious ties.⁴⁵⁸ Hafez al-Assad had always been wary of *Hezbollah* and had attempted to suppress it during Syria's occupation of Lebanon.⁴⁵⁹ It wasn't until Bashar al-Assad inherited control of Syria that the relationship between *Hezbollah* and Syria was normalised.⁴⁶⁰ For *Hezbollah*, involvement in the Syrian conflict has posed serious political challenges.⁴⁶¹ Having long positioned itself as a nationalist Islamist party in Lebanon and as the vanguard of resistance to Israel, its support for the al-Assad regime risks shattering this image.⁴⁶² As Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami argue, *Hezbollah* as an anti-Zionist movement was extremely popular amongst Syrians.⁴⁶³ However, the entry of *Hezbollah* and other Iranian supported militias added a further sectarian dimension to the Syrian conflict.⁴⁶⁴ One of *Hezbollah*'s critics, Sheikh al-Masri, published a series of pamphlets accusing *Hezbollah* of exploiting its narrative as a resistance movement, to justify its support for the al-Assad regime.⁴⁶⁵ *Hezbollah*'s involvement in Syria risks the group's position within the delicately balanced Lebanese political system. After *Hezbollah* participated in the al-Qusayr offensive, factions in the Free Syrian Army and al-Nusra threatened to

⁴⁵⁷ Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*, 1st ed. (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 371.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁵⁹ Daniel Byman, *A High Price: The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 214.

⁴⁶⁰ Levitt, 12.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

⁴⁶³ Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, 112.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ Bernard Rougier, *The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East: Northern Lebanon from Al-Qaeda to Isis*, 1st ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 73.

take the fight to Lebanon, if *Hezbollah* didn't withdraw its forces from Syria.⁴⁶⁶

Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian conflict has also drawn the ire of Lebanon's Salafists, such as the Sunni sheikh Ahmed al-Assir, whose April 2013 *fatwa* criticised *Hezbollah*'s support of the al-Assad regime.⁴⁶⁷

United Nations resolutions against the al-Assad regime have been met with vetoes by China and Russia, and sanctions have been confused and chaotic.⁴⁶⁸ Both arms and oil embargoes have been implemented against Syria by the European Union and the United States, only to be lifted later, when the West decided to aid the Syrian rebels.⁴⁶⁹ Complicating the Syrian conflict are the sectarian and political fault lines amongst the external powers involved in the conflict. As previously stated Russia, China, Iran and *Hezbollah* support the Syrian regime. The United States, the European Union, the UK, Turkey, and the Arab Sunni Bloc (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf States) all support one or other of the rebel groups (including many of the Islamist factions).⁴⁷⁰ The political and sectarian divisions have contributed to the security vacuum that has allowed ISIS to grow and thrive.⁴⁷¹

To sum up, the Syrian regime has a long and violent history of repressing Islamist movements, particularly Syria's Muslim Brotherhood and any other form of opposition. Although it was hoped the government of Bashar al-Assad would usher in a new era of reforms within Syria, this would prove not to be the case. Al-Assad showed that his regime was willing to violently repress the opposition and by releasing Salafist-

⁴⁶⁶ Lister, 128.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Atwan, 92.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

jihadist from regime prisons deliberately added to the chaos. Even after releasing the jihadists, the regime of al-Assad cynically claimed that it was engaged in fighting terrorism. Syria's conflict also attracted the intervention of regional and international powers. Western intervention gave legitimacy to Islamic State claims that this was a war being waged on the Muslim community. Islamic State was also able to exploit the divisions amongst the Syrian rebels to make gains across the country. The actions of regional and international powers would also exacerbate the Syrian conflict, this is explored further in the next chapter.

Internationalisation

This chapter examines the impact of the internationalisation of the Syrian conflict. It aims to highlight the various actors involved in the Syrian conflict. It aims to demonstrate the support that each actor, regional and international, gives to various proxies and the competing strategic objectives each is pursuing. In doing so it examines how this is prolonging the conflict and has enabled Islamic State to exploit the gaps in Syrian security.

Both countries and non-state actors intervene in civil wars for a variety of reasons, some for humanitarian reasons, others to further their own objectives.⁴⁷² As Sorenson states, they may support factions that can influence the outcome or seek to limit the influence of rivals.⁴⁷³ The internationalisation of the Syria conflict has meant that the Syrian state has been reduced to a series of conflict zones dispersed amongst the various proxies of regional and international actors.⁴⁷⁴ On one side are those, The West, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, who seek regime change.⁴⁷⁵ On the other are al-Assad's allies, Iran, *Hezbollah* and Russia, who seek to ensure that the regime remains intact and in control of Syria.⁴⁷⁶ Each is pursuing its own agenda, whether this is ensuring the security of an alliance, the containment of a "Shia Crescent", the desire for Kurdish independence and the prevention thereof, or the pursuit of terrorist organisations.⁴⁷⁷ As Patrick Cockburn suggests, neither the Syrian Government nor the

⁴⁷² David S Sorenson, *The Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War*, 1st ed. (California: Praeger Security International, 2016), 88.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁷⁴ Mabon and Royle, 20.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁶ Samer N Abboud, *Syria*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016), 120.

⁴⁷⁷ Henin, xiv.

rebels are masters of the situation in Syria, the shape of the conflict is decided by the influence of foreign powers with “diverse and contradictory aims.”⁴⁷⁸ The internationalisation and subsequent de-facto proxy war is a significant factor in the prolonging of the Syrian conflict, and a primary contributor to the existence growth of Salafist-jihadist groups such as Islamic State.⁴⁷⁹

In 2013 the Obama administration announced a coalition of Middle East states that would join the US in fighting ISIS.⁴⁸⁰ However, this announcement was made in the knowledge that many of these states were central in fostering Salafist-jihadists in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁸¹ Patrick Cockburn suggests that what we are witnessing in Syria is a situation in which five different conflicts have become entangled.⁴⁸² It is a conflict marked by an uprising against a dictator, further complicated by a sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia, and a regional proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Syrian conflict has also been a catalyst for a return to Cold War levels of rivalry and tensions between the US and Russia.⁴⁸³ The United States and Russia are pursuing competing objectives in Syria. Russia is supporting a long-term ally and reasserting itself as a global power. The US is both fighting Islamic State and attempting to counter Iranian influence in the region. Thus, the Syrian civil war is a conflict full of contradictions, not least the spectacle of absolutist and fundamentalist Sunni monarchies supporting purportedly democratic and secular rebels.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁷⁸ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 274.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 285.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

The response of the Arab states to the Syrian uprising is complicated in terms of their own reactions to the Arab Spring, and the wider Iranian-Saudi geopolitical rivalry within the region.⁴⁸⁵ For example, Patrick Cockburn quotes Saudi business magnate Prince al-Waleed bin Talal al-Saud as saying that Saudi Arabia would not take direct action against Islamic State as it did not affect Saudi Arabia directly.⁴⁸⁶ Likewise Turkey's President Erdogan declared the PKK (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* - Kurdish Workers Party) as being just as bad as Islamic State.⁴⁸⁷ At the outbreak of the rebellion in 2011, the Arab states attempted to use diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. However, they failed to achieve a consensus, and often had divergent views on how to deal with the crisis.⁴⁸⁸ Saudi Arabia and Qatar led the efforts of the Arab states. Egypt, due to its own Arab Spring transition, was side-lined. It was at the request of Saudi Arabia and Qatar that the League of Arab States reached out to the newly formed Syrian National Council.⁴⁸⁹ The League put forward a peace plan to the Syrian regime, one that called for the recognition of the Syrian National Council and the release of political prisoners, this was rejected outright by the Syrian regime.⁴⁹⁰ The Syrian regime aimed to simply buy time and was to later accept observers from the League.

However, this did little to stem the violence, which continued unabated through 2011 and escalated into 2012.⁴⁹¹ The failure of the leagues efforts led to the suspension of Syria from the League and to the imposition by the League of sanctions on Syria.⁴⁹² The closure of the Arab markets, apart from Iraq and Lebanon who refused to honour

⁴⁸⁵ Abboud, 121.

⁴⁸⁶ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 364.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Abboud, 121.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

the sanctions, was a major blow to the Syrian economy. The sanctions hastened the collapse of Syrian infrastructure and public services, which were reliant upon the cashflow from the Gulf States.⁴⁹³ This, in turn, added fuel to the flames of rebellion; one of the major appeals of the Islamic State is its provision of public goods. Islamic State's pretensions to statehood allow it a veneer of legitimacy.⁴⁹⁴ It can leverage its finances, from oil, sale of artefacts, and hostage deals, to provide public goods and services.⁴⁹⁵ Its militants are able to compel those under its sway to work for it, press-ganging doctors, engineers and educators to carry out the wishes of the Islamic State.⁴⁹⁶ Additionally, Islamic State's control of oil fields and food reserves give it a further layer of compulsion, ensuring acquiescence from the population under its control.⁴⁹⁷

There was a lack of consensus amongst the Arab States as to the extent to which they should insert themselves, militarily or diplomatically, into the conflict. Compounding this were disagreements amongst the League's members as to the legitimacy of the Syrian opposition.⁴⁹⁸ Out of the dysfunction of the League of Arab States, Saudi Arabia and Qatar emerged as the two most important Arab actors.⁴⁹⁹ Saudi Arabia and Qatar have long been political rivals despite their commonality as Sunni dominated monarchies.⁵⁰⁰ This has most recently been personified in June 2017 by the Saudi led blockade of Qatar over its support of Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁹⁴ Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, 139.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ Abboud, 123.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ Dahlia Kholaf, "Will the Gcc Survive Qatar-Saudi Rivalry? Diplomatic Spat Could Weaken or Even Unravel Six-Nation Gulf Cooperation Council, Analysts Said.," Al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/03/will-gcc-survive-qatar-saudi-rivalry-201431864034267256.html>.

⁵⁰¹ Max Fisher, "How the Saudi-Qatar Rivalry, Now Combusting, Reshaped the Middle East," New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/world/middleeast/how-the-saudi-qatar-rivalry-now-combusting-reshaped-the-middle-east.html?mcubz=2>.

The two countries have pursued divergent policies in the post Arab Spring environment, supporting opposing proxy groups within the region.⁵⁰²

During the Egyptian uprising Saudi Arabia and Qatar were on opposite sides, with Qatar supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Saudis throwing their weight behind the Egyptian military, heartily supporting the coup d'état that installed Adel Fattah al-Sisi as Egypt's president.⁵⁰³ This geo-political rivalry led to the fractionalisation of the Syrian opposition, especially amongst the Syrian National Coalition (a coalition formed in Dohar, Qatar in November 2012 consisting of the Syrian National Council and other opposition groups).⁵⁰⁴ This has resulted in the Syrian National Coalition failing to gain true legitimacy, as Saudi Arabia and Qatar were wary of the other exerting influence over the Syrian National Coalition. Where the two Gulf States did converge was in the arming of rebel groups in Syria. Weapons were sourced from Libya and Eastern European states and dispersed by Saudi and Qatari intermediaries to the rebel groups.⁵⁰⁵ The arming of the rebel groups also led to the proliferation of violent non-state actors within Syria as arms intended for the rebels have found their way onto the black market and into the hands of the Salafist-jihadists.⁵⁰⁶ Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey facilitated the flow of small arms into Syria, ensuring that the weapons were widely dispersed.⁵⁰⁷ The way in which the small arms were parcelled out ensured that the arms were not concentrated in the hands of any

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Abboud, 124.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 125.

⁵⁰⁶ Mark Mazzetti and Ali Younes, "C.I.A. Arms for Syrian Rebels Supplied Black Market, Officials Say," New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/27/world/middleeast/cia-arms-for-syrian-rebels-supplied-black-market-officials-say.html?_r=0.

⁵⁰⁷ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 363.

single group.⁵⁰⁸ But this also created a bitter rivalry amongst the rebel groups for scarce resources. Consequently, no cohesive opposition was formed; instead, mistrust and competition have marred the opposition.⁵⁰⁹

Syria has enjoyed strong support from the Russian Federation, whose links to the Syrian state stretch to the beginnings of the Cold War. Russia's support for Syria stems from its geo-political interests, rather than any real affinity with the Syrian regime.⁵¹⁰ Christopher Phillips points out that Russia was not wed to the continuance of Bashar al-Assad's rule, whom Putin was reported to dislike.⁵¹¹ Russia's primary concerns are threefold: Western intervention, the threat of Salafist-jihadists (particularly those from the Caucasus), and its geo-economic interests.⁵¹² Russia's interest in Syria also stems from what it sees as Western incursion into areas of Russian security interest. Russia has a weakened economy and a shrinking sphere of influence.⁵¹³ It fears the expansion of NATO into those areas of Eastern Europe: Ukraine, the Baltic States, Poland etc., that Russia sees as being exclusively within Russia's sphere of influence.⁵¹⁴ Like many authoritarian governments, Russia fears outside intervention. The colour revolutions that took place after the fall of the Soviet Union, often with Western backing, were of deep concern. Russia was worried that these regime changes may be exported to Russia itself, and it is through this lens that it views any discussion of

⁵⁰⁸ BBC, "Who Is Supplying Weapons to the Warring Sides in Syria?," BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22906965>.

⁵⁰⁹ Abboud, 125.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 126.

⁵¹¹ Phillips, 219.

⁵¹² Abboud, 126.

⁵¹³ Aboultaif, 6.

⁵¹⁴ Abboud, 126.

intervention in Syria.⁵¹⁵ Russia also views its intervention in Syria as an opportunity to break out of the US dominated post-Cold War order.⁵¹⁶

A further factor in Russian support for the Syrian regime, was the use of UN resolution (UN Resolution 1973) as cover for Western use of force to overthrow the Libyan regime.⁵¹⁷ This has led to a deep-seated mistrust over Western intentions when it comes to talk of interventions and of Western attempts to resolve the Syrian Civil War. Russia also has domestic interests in Syria. Russia is a major supplier of military arms to the Syrian regime, the value of which is estimated at some \$4 billion.⁵¹⁸ The Russian state also has significant investments in manufacturing, oil and gas in Syria. Perversely, the continuation of the conflict threatens these investments, whilst providing Russia a cash flow through the ongoing provision of arms to Syria.⁵¹⁹ Russia sale of arms fulfilled a two-fold objective. Arms sales are a key part of the Russian economy, worth approximately \$15.5 billion.⁵²⁰ The public use of Russian arms in Syria, acts as a cynical advertisement to prospective customers.⁵²¹ Additionally, should the al-Assad regime fall, Russia stands to lose \$4 billion in unpaid arms contracts.⁵²² Another important geo- political aspect to Russian support for Syria, is Russia's relationship with Iran. Iran and Russia have important economic and military ties. Iran is a major purchaser of Russian arms, which is likely to increase with the lifting of sanctions against Iran. Iran relies on Russian technology and knowledge for the development of its nuclear capability.⁵²³ Iran and Russia share the fear that Syria's Salafist-jihadists

⁵¹⁵ Phillips, 219.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 220.

⁵¹⁷ Abboud, 127.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 129.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Phillips, 221.

⁵²¹ Ibid.

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Abboud, 128.

could spread into the Caucasus, a situation that could destabilise both Iran and Russia.⁵²⁴

Iran was quick to step up and give its support to the al-Assad regime.⁵²⁵ Of the two states, it is Iran that has the largest interest in the outcome of the Syrian conflict, as well as in Iraq. The Syrian regime heavily depends on Iran, financially and militarily. The Iraqi government too, is significantly reliant upon Iranian acquiescence and support to achieve long-term stability. Iran's attempt to reassert itself as a regional power, has brought it into proxy conflict with its major geo-political rival, Saudi Arabia. The Syrian conflict has seen a reversal of roles for Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran the revolutionary and proponent of change in the Middle East, has become the defender of the status quo in Syria.⁵²⁶ Whilst the Syrian-Iranian relationship predates the current conflict, Iranian support for Syria forms a major part of Iran's foreign policy.⁵²⁷ Many of Iran's rivals openly welcomed what they saw as being a blow to Iran's regional ambition's, had al-Assad fallen it would have deprived Iran of a major ally.⁵²⁸ Iran's support for Syria also rests on Syria's symbolic value to Iran. During the 2000s Iran had sought to increase its regional appeal. By aligning with a Sunni Arab, although Alawite dominated, Syria, Iran had aimed to counter Saudi Arabia who had attempted to delegitimise Iran's appeal by stressing Iran's Shia and Persian character.⁵²⁹ However, Iran, along with *Hezbollah's* involvement in Syria, has reinforced the Saudi led narrative of Shia against Sunni.⁵³⁰ Whilst some of the Sunni leaders saw the uprising as

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Kilcullen, *Blood Year: Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror*, 68.

⁵²⁶ Phillips, 151.

⁵²⁷ Abboud, 130.

⁵²⁸ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 283.

⁵²⁹ Phillips, 152.

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 153.

the beginning of a campaign against the Shia and Shia dominated states, it is a gross generalisation to see this rivalry as simply a sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia.⁵³¹ More significant than any perceived religious competition, are the economic and political ambitions of each.⁵³² For Iran and by proxy *Hezbollah*, the loss of an ally in Syria poses long term strategic problems, given that Syria acts as a vital link between the two.⁵³³

Iran's principal relationship in the region lies with Lebanon's *Hezbollah*. Iran's relationship with *Hezbollah*, stems from forming *Hezbollah* during the height of Lebanon's Civil War in the 1980s.⁵³⁴ Iran's relationship with *Hezbollah* has extensively evolved over time. Although some observers of the Syrian conflict have described *Hezbollah* as being Iran's proxy, this is a gross generalisation. Iran's relationship with Lebanon's Shia is centuries old, beginning with the emigration of Shia *ulema* (Scholars) from Jabal Amil (south Lebanon) to Safavid Persia in the 16th century.⁵³⁵ The relationship between *Hezbollah* and Iran is not one of master and proxy, but is formed from shared interests in the region, and through Iran's financing of *Hezbollah*.⁵³⁶ The Syrian conflict presents *Hezbollah* with an existential dilemma. Syria provides *Hezbollah* with strategic depth, and a vital link to Iran.⁵³⁷ Syria also provides some legitimacy to *Hezbollah* as a part of the "Resistance" which is presented as a defense against Israel and the West. The fall of al-Assad also presents *Hezbollah* with a

⁵³¹ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 283.

⁵³² Abboud, 130.

⁵³³ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 283.

⁵³⁴ Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, 1st ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 14.

⁵³⁵ Rula Abisaab, "Jabal 'āmel," <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/jabal-amel-2>.

⁵³⁶ Abboud, 131.

⁵³⁷ Phillips, 157.

domestic threat. A Sunni dominated Syria is likely to shift the balance of power within Lebanon in favour of Lebanon's Sunni to the detriment of Shia and *Hezbollah*.⁵³⁸

Although *Hezbollah* is intimately involved in the Syrian conflict, Iran's role is much deeper.⁵³⁹ Iran is invested heavily in the Syrian regime in terms of blood and treasure, due to its links to *Hezbollah* and as a means of countering Saudi and US influence. It has committed many of its senior military commanders to supporting the Syrian regime along with extensive involvement of Iranian military personal in the ground fighting.⁵⁴⁰ Whilst the Iranian government is unyielding in its support for the Syrian regime, this should not be read as Iran being willing to extend the conflict.⁵⁴¹ Iran's regional aspirations are not best served by the ongoing conflict in Syria. The conflict impacts on Iran's relationships with both Iraq and *Hezbollah* and threatens Iran's dual goals of being a regional power and of normalising Iran's relationship with the wider international community.⁵⁴² Saudi Arabia has acted to stem Iranian influence within the region and has attempted to link Iran to the conflict in Yemen.

Likewise, the Syrian conflict is inflicting its costs upon Iran's northern neighbour, Turkey. Turkey's role in the Syrian conflict is complex. Turkey has been a supporter, a facilitator and a victim of the civil war in Syria.⁵⁴³ Turkey struggled to prevent the Syrian conflict from spilling over its borders.⁵⁴⁴ During June 2012, a Turkish jet was

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

⁵³⁹ Abboud, 131.

⁵⁴⁰ Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, "Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict," in *Occasional Paper*, ed. Royal United Services Institute (United Kingdom: Royal United Services Institute, 2016), 4.

⁵⁴¹ Abboud, 132.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Al-Jazeera, "Deadly Isis Attack Hits Turkish Soldiers in Syria," Al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/deadly-isis-attack-hits-turkish-soldiers-syria-170120135609620.html>.

⁵⁴⁴ Phillips, 172.

shot down by Syrian air defences and in October 2012, the town of Akcakale was hit by a stray Syrian mortar round killing five civilians.⁵⁴⁵ Although Turkey had initially encouraged the regime of al-Assad to enact reforms, Turkey soon reversed its position making the replacement of the al-Assad regime a key foreign policy goal.⁵⁴⁶ The Syrian conflict has also resurrected the decades old conflict with Turkey's Kurdish population.⁵⁴⁷ As the Kurds become more militarily capable and more nationalistic in their outlook, the stability and territorial integrity of Turkey remains at risk from the ongoing conflict in Syria.⁵⁴⁸ Turkey has also demonstrated a willingness to use the Salafist-jihadists as a foil to prevent territorial gains by the Kurdish forces.⁵⁴⁹ An example is Turkey's refusal to cut off Islamic State's logistical chain during the battle for Kobane. By doing so Turkey demonstrated that it would have preferred Islamic State to PYD (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat* - Democratic Union Party) in holding the town.⁵⁵⁰ Turkey's support for Syrian Islamist groups such as *Ahrar al-Sham* also places it at odds with Turkey's NATO allies.⁵⁵¹ Turkey's support for Islamist groups in Syria stem from a desire to counter Kurdish expansion and as a means of asserting itself as the leader of Sunni Muslims. Turkey's desire to curtail the Kurds places it at odds with the US who view the Kurds as the most effective force in fighting the Islamic State. Turkey had initially adopted a three-tiered approach to the Syrian conflict. Firstly, Turkey provided support to Syrian army defectors, who would form the basis of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).⁵⁵² Turkey permitted these forces to transit through Turkey and

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁶ Abboud, 133.

⁵⁴⁷ Phillips, 172.

⁵⁴⁸ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 365.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 364.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ Aaron Stein and Sam Heller, "The Trouble with Turkey's Favourite Syrian Islamists," War on the Rocks, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/08/the-trouble-with-turkeys-favorite-syrian-islamists/>.

⁵⁵² Abboud, 133.

to use Turkey as a logistical base.⁵⁵³ Secondly, Turkey aimed to assist in the organisation of the Syrian opposition, legitimising the opposition forces as the representatives of the Syrian people.⁵⁵⁴ Lastly, Turkey was a primary advocate for intervention in the Syrian conflict, aiming to organise the opposition and to provide them with a safe-haven from which to operate.⁵⁵⁵ These objectives did not survive the first year of the conflict. By 2012, Turkey had abandoned its strategy.

Casting aside its allies in the Syrian opposition, increasingly Turkey turned to other armed groups in Syria who had been making gains against the Syrian regime, such as the *al-Qaeda* affiliate, *Jabhat al-Nusra*.⁵⁵⁶ As Patrick Cockburn points out the exact nature of Turkey's relationship with the Syrian Salafist-jihadist groups is clouded, but there appears to be an element of collaboration between the two.⁵⁵⁷ After the capture of Turkey's consulate in Mosul, by Islamic State forces on 10 June 2014, Turkey had to confront the question of who was the bigger threat to its national security, the Kurds or Islamic State.⁵⁵⁸ Turkey has been prepared to turn a blind eye to Islamic State providing it focuses on the Kurds; as a short-term strategy Turkey aims to use Islamic State to weaken the Kurds and prevent the Kurds from attacking Turkey. Turkey's ambitions in Syria are tempered by its relationships with Iraq, Iran and Russia, all of which are economically and geo-politically important to Turkey.⁵⁵⁹ Likewise, Turkey has found itself at odds with Saudi Arabia and Qatar.⁵⁶⁰ Due to their competition for the mantle of Sunni leadership in the region, the three states have frequently clashed over their

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 365.

⁵⁵⁸ Griffin, 123.

⁵⁵⁹ Adrian Campbell, "Why Russia, Turkey and Iran Are Natural Allies," *The Conversation*, <http://theconversation.com/why-russia-turkey-and-iran-are-natural-allies-70819>.

⁵⁶⁰ Abboud, 134.

respective support to the opposition, and as to how the opposition should be structured. Adding another layer of complexity to Turkey's decision-making process vis-a-vis Syria, is domestic opposition to Turkey's role in the Syrian conflict.⁵⁶¹ Turkey has found itself increasingly drawn into the Syrian conflict, with Islamic State and PKK (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* - Kurdish Workers Party) attacks being conducted on Turkish soil, and with Turkish military incursions into Syria.⁵⁶²

Due to the complexities of regional politics, Western reaction to the rise of the Islamic State and the Syrian crisis has been marked and marred by contradiction and confusion. Whilst most Western states agree on the threat that the Islamic State poses, there is a distinct lack of consensus as to what actions should be taken over the Syrian crisis.⁵⁶³ Indeed Islamic State's success has in part been driven by the divisions amongst its enemies.⁵⁶⁴ Although the Syrian opposition had initially pinned its hopes on Western support for the overthrow of the al-Assad regime, the West has been distinctly ambivalent and at times contradictory, in its approach to the Syrian crisis.⁵⁶⁵ The countries of the West have universally condemned the al-Assad regime and have been vocal in their calls for regime change. The war wariness inflicted by the on-going campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, plus the controversy surrounding the 2003 invasion of Iraq, have made Western states reluctant to intervene in the Syrian conflict.⁵⁶⁶ Furthermore, Syria's population size, geography and its military support from Russia and Iran, make a military intervention operationally difficult.⁵⁶⁷ Additionally, Russia,

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Alessandria Masi and Kim Bode, "Expert View: The Ypg, Pkk and Turkey's Options in Syria," Syria Deeply, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/05/15/expert-view-the-ypg-pkk-and-turkeys-options-in-syria>.

⁵⁶³ Abboud, 135.

⁵⁶⁴ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 363.

⁵⁶⁵ Abboud, 135.

⁵⁶⁶ Phillips, 139.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 170.

Iran, and to a lesser extent China's, support for al-Assad has created a state of political paralysis amongst the Western states.

Due to the reluctance to intervene in any significant military fashion, the European Union (EU) has largely relied upon sanctions to influence the outcome in Syria. The EU quickly imposed sanctions on Syrian officials, Syrian state organisations, and trade.⁵⁶⁸ The banning of Syrian oil exports was a significant step by the EU, as Europe was the primary export market for Syrian oil.⁵⁶⁹ By 2013 the EU had relaxed its stance on oil exports, which allowed Syrian opposition groups to sell oil exported from rebel held regions.⁵⁷⁰ Even though the sanctions regime imposed by the EU has been largely ineffective in encouraging the Syrian political and economic elite to withdraw their support for al-Assad, the EU has not been willing to take further steps against the Syrian regime.⁵⁷¹ This is even as the EU's security comes under increasing pressure from an influx of refugees, and a series of *al-Qaeda*/Islamic State inspired attacks, such as the Manchester Stadium attack in 2017.⁵⁷² The impact of both the refugee crisis and of the attacks has been to exacerbate divisions between EU member states. The security situation has impacted upon EU domestic policies, with the rise of nationalistic and populist movements within the EU.⁵⁷³ Indirectly, it has led to a geo-political push

⁵⁶⁸ Abboud, 136.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

⁵⁷² Kate Bennhold, Steven Erlanger, and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Terror Alert in Britain Is Raised to Maximum as Isis Claims Manchester Attack," *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/world/europe/manchester-arena-attack-ariana-grande.html?mcubz=2&_r=0.

⁵⁷³ Christina Pazzanese, "In Europe, Nationalism Rising: After the Triumphs of Trump and Brexit, Right-Leaning Parties See Paths to Political Power," *Harvard University*, <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/02/in-europe-nationalisms-rising/>.

towards isolationism and strained the framework of the EU, with many of the member states placing domestic concerns over the needs of the wider EU.⁵⁷⁴

Likewise, the United States has been at odds in its attempts to deal with the Syrian crisis.⁵⁷⁵ America has demonstrated a persistent reluctance to commit political and military resources to its stated goal of regime change in Syria, outside of the deployment of small groups of special forces.⁵⁷⁶ Although in April of 2011 the Obama administration had declared that al-Assad “must go”, America has been deeply reluctant to become further engaged in the Middle East.⁵⁷⁷ This has been the result of the US downsizing from its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and an increasingly isolationist approach to international affairs.⁵⁷⁸ This is exemplified by the US failure to act over the al-Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons.⁵⁷⁹ Despite having declared the use of chemical weapons as a “red line” the Obama administration failed to act upon its implied threat.⁵⁸⁰ Many American allies within the region were bitterly disappointed by the US failure to act.⁵⁸¹ The American wariness can be attributed to a lack of consensus amongst the Western states, the veto power of Russia and China at the United Nations Security Council and most significantly, an unwillingness to become involved in another long-term military engagement in the Middle East.⁵⁸² Although a “red line” for the Obama administration, it wasn’t until April 2017 when a more belligerent President Trump took power, that missile strikes were carried out in response to a chemical

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Abboud, 137.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ Bacevich, 330.

⁵⁷⁸ Sorenson, 98.

⁵⁷⁹ Bacevich, 330.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ Phillips, 184.

⁵⁸² Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 293.

attack.⁵⁸³ The missile strikes were largely ineffective, achieving little. The United States has also been frequently hamstrung by its Middle Eastern allies who pursued sets of strategic objectives that have contradicted American objectives.⁵⁸⁴ At the forefront of the policy disputes over regime change in Syria, however, is the presence of the Islamic State. The conflict in Syria, has come to be framed in black and white terms; either a continuance of the al-Assad regime or the Islamic State.⁵⁸⁵ Framing the Syrian conflict in such a way not only legitimises the al-Assad regime, but also undermines the risk posed by other regional actors.

The competing strategic objectives of the various actors in the Syrian conflict have created a security environment that Islamic State has been able to exploit. By utilizing and supporting differing factions, the international community is not only prolonging the current conflict but is laying the groundwork for the next conflict. In a similar fashion to how US support for Mujahedeen factions against the Soviets in Afghanistan indirectly led to the advent of *al-Qaeda*, it is the external actors in Syria's civil war that are reshaping the Middle East. This has, as discussed in the next chapter, allowed non-state actors to pursue attempts at building alternatives to the state or in the Kurdish case attempt to form a new state.

⁵⁸³ Barbara Starr and Jeremy Diamond, "Trump Launches Military Strike against Syria," CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/06/politics/donald-trump-syria-military/>.

⁵⁸⁴ Aaron Stein, "When It Comes to Syria and the Kurds, Erdogan Will Leave Washington Empty-Handed," War on the Rocks, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/when-it-comes-to-syria-and-the-kurds-erdogan-will-leave-washington-empty-handed/>.

⁵⁸⁵ Abboud, 138.

Fragmentation and Alternative Governance

This chapter aims to demonstrate how the conflict in Syria has permitted non-state actors such as Islamic State to pursue attempts at creating their own alternatives to the state. Islamic State's primary objective is to replace the states of the Middle East with its version of a Caliphate. The Kurds also hope to use the situation to expand their territory and to move from autonomy to full independence. *Al-Qaeda* in the form of *Jabhat al-Nusra* continues in its attempt to build a grassroots movement in its strategic objective of building its version of a Caliphate.

The fragmentation of Iraq and Syria have provided space for groups such as Islamic State to carve out territories and establish forms of alternative governance that challenge the sovereignty of states. The concept of the modern state is grounded in the end of the Thirty-Year War, with the 1648 Peace of Westphalia.⁵⁸⁶ Signified by the treaties of Munster and Osnabruck, the Peace of Westphalia delegitimised the political role of the Catholic Church in Europe.⁵⁸⁷ This established the state as having exclusive authority and monopoly over the use of violence within a defined territory. This concept is the cornerstone of the modern international system. Key to this structure is the concept of non-interference, which prevents a state from interfering in the internal affairs of another state.⁵⁸⁸ It is a zero-sum understanding of what constitutes a state, yet non-state actors such as Islamic State challenge this understanding.⁵⁸⁹ Specifically, the Islamic State, in announcing its Caliphate, seeks a return to religion as being the arbiter

⁵⁸⁶ Sorenson, 58.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ Mabon and Royle, 16.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

of the state. As Sorenson states, no previous Islamist group had laid claim to the recreation of the Caliphate; al-Baghdadi's declaration of a Caliphate was the first time a Islamist leader revived the medieval nature of political Islam.⁵⁹⁰ However, it should be noted that other Islamist groups such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Party of Liberation) also have the establishment of a Caliphate as a key tenet. The difference being that Islamic State claimed to have re-established the Caliphate, whilst for others including *al-Qaeda* and its affiliates, the Caliphate still remains a distant objective. Mabon and Royle suggest that sovereignty can be found in any community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territorial area.⁵⁹¹ This is predicated on three elements: a centralised administrative bureaucracy, a unified armed force that can monopolise violence, and a means through which taxes can be collected.⁵⁹²

For both Iraq and Syria, this understanding is problematic as a few groups are positioned to challenge the sovereignty of either state. Predominant amongst these are the two major Salafist-jihadist groups, *al-Nusra* and Islamic State, Islamist groups such as *Ahrar al-Sham*, and others such as the Kurds and Iraq's Shia militias. As Mabon and Royle point out: "It is when sovereignty is unwillingly violated – against the wishes of rulers – that many of the conditions are created for the emergence of groups such as ISIS. The reduction of authority, coupled with violations of territorial integrity, has presented opportunities for groups to challenge the state."⁵⁹³ When the interaction between the various identity groups descends into violence, a state is further weakened, with power being decentralised from the center to non-state actors on the periphery.⁵⁹⁴

⁵⁹⁰ Sorenson, 64.

⁵⁹¹ Mabon and Royle, 16.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 18.

Samer N. Abboud suggests that what we are witnessing is the emergence of new political identities and a situation in which military power is being utilised to create new political-administrative structures.⁵⁹⁵ As the situation in Iraq and Syria are fluid and in a constant state of flux, these political-administrative structures are not sustainable in the long-term.⁵⁹⁶ Almost certainly this is the case with Islamic State, as it comes under increasing pressure it is likely to splinter and morph, recreating itself as some other entity, as it has done in the past. The Kurds and their enterprise offers more stability over time, but it too is subject to both internal and external pressures. *Al-Nusra* is the wildcard, although it remains true to the *al-Qaeda* ideology from which it descends. It has made attempts to moderate its stance, forming alliances with other Syrian rebels, Islamist or otherwise. It has also attempted to re-brand itself as a Syrian nationalist-Islamist group, with an emphasis on its identity as a Syrian group.

The region's Kurds have used the conflict in Syria and Iraq to consolidate their current levels of autonomy in Iraq and expand their territorial control in Syria.⁵⁹⁷ The Kurdish forces have been lauded by many within the West as being the most effective group in fighting the Islamic State. But in many respects the PKK (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* - Kurdish Workers Party) resembles Islamic State.⁵⁹⁸ The PKK, which has been fighting for Kurdish self-rule since 1984, is represented in Syria by the People's Defence Units (*Yekineyen Parastina Gel* - YPG) and its political wing, the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat* - PYD).⁵⁹⁹ Like Islamic State, PKK

⁵⁹⁵ Abboud, 163.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 164.

⁵⁹⁷ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 362.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ Phillips, 133.

demonstrates fanaticism and military prowess and like Islamic State is regarded as a terrorist organisation by many states, including the United States.⁶⁰⁰

PKK forces are disciplined and dedicated to the cause of nationalism, and after more than three decades of war against the Turks, highly skilled light infantry.⁶⁰¹ Marxist-Leninist in ideology, although this has lessened over time, PKK seeks to monopolise power within the Kurdish community.⁶⁰² Although currently imprisoned by the Turkish authorities, the PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan still leads the organisation.⁶⁰³ The PKK's leadership operates from the Kandil Mountains in Northern Iraq, along with some 7,000 troops that had been withdrawn from Turkey under the terms of the 2013 ceasefire.⁶⁰⁴ During 2013, the PYD announced its plans to create an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, similar to the Kurdish region in Iraq.⁶⁰⁵ It was intended that a provisional government, incorporating all the Kurdish groups in Syria, would be formed.

By January 2014, the three regions of Efrin, Cizre and Kobani had declared their autonomy, as a part of the Canton Based Democratic Autonomy of Rojava.⁶⁰⁶ At the same time the YPG set about securing the Rojava areas, linking the regions to be administered by the Kurdish authority.⁶⁰⁷ Whilst northeast of Syria has largely come under Kurdish control. The administration itself is not exclusively based on ethnicity, as

⁶⁰⁰ Kim Sengupta, "Us Still Sees Kurdish Group as 'Terrorist Organisation', Says Turkish Pm," Independent, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/turkey-us-kurdish-syria-terrorist-organisation-militia-pkk-erdogan-binali-yildirim-a7732781.html>.

⁶⁰¹ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 363.

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁵ Abboud, 164.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

the Rojava administration has taken steps to ensure that all ethnicities within its geographic bounds are represented.⁶⁰⁸ Indeed, the administration's own charter, the Charter of Social Contract of Democratic Autonomy, specifies that all ethnicities are recognised as equals.⁶⁰⁹

The concept of Democratic Autonomy was developed by Abdullah Ocalan. In principle, it rejects the idea of an independent Kurdish state, but instead seeks to obtain autonomy within existing state boundaries.⁶¹⁰ That is that any Kurdish autonomous region within Syria is to have as its foundation the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic societies in which the Kurdish population resides, rather than being based purely on ethnicity.⁶¹¹ Whilst this is the ideal put forward to the Syrian masses, it does not preclude Syrian Kurds from seeking full independence, or from with linking with their Iraqi counterparts.⁶¹² However, there are significant international restraints on such a thing happening. Turkey has made its position clear a contiguous independent Kurdish nation across Syria and Iraq would be abhorrent to Turkish interests.⁶¹³ Indeed, Turkey has demonstrated a willingness to intervene militarily in both Syria and Iraq, to prevent the formation of a Kurdish state.⁶¹⁴ Sorenson points out that by August 2015, Turkey had flown over 400 airstrikes against PPK positions and only four against positions held by Islamic State fighters.⁶¹⁵ It has also shown a propensity to turn a blind eye to radicals crossing its border, if their actions would hamper the Kurds.⁶¹⁶ Additionally, the Kurds

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 165.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., 168.

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

⁶¹² Ibid.

⁶¹³ Stein.

⁶¹⁴ Angus McDowall and Nick Tattersall, "Turkey-Kurdish Rivalry Complicates Push against Islamic State in Syria's Raqqa," Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-idUSKCN12R1RW>.

⁶¹⁵ Sorenson, 93.

⁶¹⁶ Phillips, 186.

themselves are not a monolithic entity and their political system is embedded with internal rivalries and competing agendas.⁶¹⁷

The situation in Syria remains heavily contested and dynamic. Any attempts at establishing an autonomous Kurdish region is subject to the predatory behaviors of the Syrian regime, Salafist-jihadist and other rebel groups. The Syrian situation is one of shifting alliances and a dynamic military situation.⁶¹⁸ However the Kurds have managed to construct an alternative administration in Syria, and more extensively in Iraq. Indeed, the Kurdish administration in Iraq, has presented itself as the “economic tiger of the Middle East” and has made extensive efforts to attract Western investment particularly in its oil fields.⁶¹⁹ The deepening interest in Kurdish oil fields has led the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG. Kurdish: *Hikumentî Heremî Kurdistan*. Arabic: *Hukumat Iqlim Kurdistan*) to sign agreements with companies such as ExxonMobil.⁶²⁰ The exploitation of the oil fields has given the Kurds a true chance at forming an economically and politically independent state. However, it is not without its critics, with some with the Kurdish political system seeing Kurdistan as making the same mistakes as the Iranian Shah did with Western oil companies in the 1970’s, by becoming beholden to and overly reliant on foreign powers.⁶²¹

Within Syria, the three Kurdish cantons have established legislative and judicial councils, as well as an executive body that are responsible for the canton’s

⁶¹⁷ Galip Dalay, "Kurdish Politics Amid the Fight against the Isis.. Can a Common Cause Surmount Old Rivalries?," ed. Al-Jazeera (Mecca: Al-Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2016).

⁶¹⁸ Abboud, 168.

⁶¹⁹ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 326.

⁶²⁰ Ibid., 327.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 328.

administration.⁶²² Sitting above these is an umbrella organisation, the Rojava Democratic Society Movement, that is responsible for coordinating political and social life in the cantons.⁶²³ There are however, several issues confronting the Kurdish authority. The two major issues are that the Kurdish territory is not a contiguous one and the influence of the PYD on the administration.⁶²⁴ The PYD exerts a significant amount of power within the cantons and much of the decision making lies outside of the administrative structure with local PYD units.⁶²⁵ The largest issue is that the Rojava project is solely a PYD one, the Kurdish National Council (Kurdish: *Encumena Nistimani Ya Kurdi Li Suryi* - ENKS/KNC. Arabic: *Al-Majlis Al-Watani Al-Kurdi*) having withdrawn its support at the beginning.⁶²⁶ There are significant disagreements between the PYD and the KNC, many of whom were committed to non-violence.⁶²⁷ As Christopher Phillips points out during the period May – June 2012, the spectre of intra-Kurdish violence was considered a high probability.⁶²⁸ The disagreement between the KNC and the PYD lies in a dispute over who has the authority to act on behalf of Syria's Kurds and reflects the leadership desires of their respective patrons.⁶²⁹ There is also debate amongst the respective Kurdish groups as to the success of the Kurdish project.⁶³⁰ As Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami state Turkish Kurds have been enthusiastic about PYD rule in Syria highlighting the PYD leftist and egalitarian rhetoric to their Western supporters.⁶³¹ Syrian Kurds, for whom the rhetoric hasn't met reality tend to be less enthusiastic but mostly welcome external support.⁶³² Kurdish leaders have taken

⁶²² Abboud, 169.

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 170.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ Phillips, 133.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Abboud, 170.

⁶³⁰ Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, 217.

⁶³¹ Ibid., 218.

⁶³² Ibid.

full advantage of the Syrian crisis to pursue their political aspirations, however; it is unclear if this will lead to the formation of an independent state.⁶³³

It is clear, however, that regardless of the outcome of the Syrian conflict, the political structure of Syria will have to account for an autonomous Kurdish administration. But this will be shaped by internal Kurdish rivalries, the influence of its international patrons, and the geo-political desires of regional and international powers.⁶³⁴ An example here would be the competing strategic priorities of the United States and Turkey regarding the Kurds. The US recognising the effectiveness of the Kurds in fighting Islamic State have provided the Kurds substantial military support. For the Turks, for whom a strategic priority is containing Kurdish regional ambitions, the US support and the growing capability of the Kurds is an immediate and long-term security issue.

Key to the Islamic State's legitimacy amongst its supporters is in its ability to gain and retain territory.⁶³⁵ Unlike the Kurds, Islamic State has no interest in working within the existing political structures in either Syria or Iraq. In its declaration of a Caliphate, Islamic State demands a radical social change.⁶³⁶ Unlike the other non-state actors within Syria, Islamic State intends to be exactly what it declares itself to be, a state. As such Islamic State represents a direct threat to the geo-political integrity of both Syria and Iraq.⁶³⁷ It is difficult, however, to ascertain exactly how the Islamic State

⁶³³ Abboud, 170.

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 171.

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 172.

is administered or what its administrative structure looks like, due to the lack of verifiable reporting from within the territories that it currently holds.

A key factor in the expansion of the Islamic State is the extent to which it is embedded in the battlefield economies of Syria and Iraq.⁶³⁸ It is the wealthiest terror group in the world whose wealth is largely obtained by illegitimate and violent means.⁶³⁹ The group has financed itself through the selling of oil on the black market, extortion, kidnapping, taxation, and the sale of looted artifacts.⁶⁴⁰ Historically, Salafist-jihadist groups received much of their funding from private individuals, however, the flow of funds from the Gulf has led to speculation of state sponsorship.⁶⁴¹ Whilst the finger has been pointed at states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait, due to their support for other factions, the allegations remain unproven.⁶⁴² It is estimated that the Islamic State had earned up to \$40 million a month during the year 2014, through the export of black market oil.⁶⁴³ Much of their oil is smuggled out through Turkey and the Kurdish controlled areas of Iraq, along the old established smuggling routes.⁶⁴⁴ Large sums are also made from the sale of antiquities, captured arms and equipment, along with requisitioned private property to criminal groups.⁶⁴⁵ The security environment in which Islamic State exists makes it difficult for the conduct of productive economic activity.⁶⁴⁶ Islamic State is dependent upon deals with both the Syrian and Iraqi states for the provision of electricity.⁶⁴⁷ Whilst Islamic State has seized

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 173.

⁶³⁹ Burke, 94-95.

⁶⁴⁰ Abboud, 173.

⁶⁴¹ Burke, 94.

⁶⁴² Ibid., 95.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Abboud, 173.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 174.

the control of various dams, it lacks the capability to run and maintain them. Hence it has been reliant on the Syrian and Iraq states to pay the salaries of the engineers required to run them.⁶⁴⁸ This is not to imply collusion between the Iraqi and Syrian states with the Islamic State, but is an arrangement of pragmatic necessity, as these dams also supply electricity to areas not under Islamic State control.⁶⁴⁹

Inside the urban areas under its domain, Islamic State has been able to provide rudimentary services, which are almost non-existent in the rural areas. The Islamic State has also issued appeals for judges, administrators and medical staff, as it doesn't have sufficient trained people to carry out its ambitions.⁶⁵⁰ The Islamic State relies upon force and fear to ensure its rule; many of the services are provided or denied dependent on a determination of an individuals or populations loyalty to the regime. Services such as education are denied to women and are solely geared towards the propagation of Islamic State's interpretation of Islam.⁶⁵¹ The schooling provided by Islamic State is purged of anything deemed un-Islamic and consists almost exclusively of study of the *Qur'an* and *Shari'a*.⁶⁵² The rule of the Islamic State has also been marked by massive human rights abuses, not least of which has been its treatment of captured women. In 2014, Islamic State distributed a pamphlet named *Su'al wa-Jawah fi al-Sabi wa-Riqab* (Questions and Answers on Taking Captives and Slaves) about their operations in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁵³ The pamphlet is nothing more than a selective theological justification for the wholesale enslavement and rape of women and children.⁶⁵⁴ In particular, captured

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁹ John Vidal, "Water Supply Key to Outcome of Conflicts in Iraq and Syria, Experts Warn " The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jul/02/water-key-conflict-iraq-syria-isis>.

⁶⁵⁰ Burke, 97.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 98-99.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 98.

⁶⁵³ Hosken, 224.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid.

Yazidi women and children have been the primary victims. Reports from human rights groups have well documented the abuses, and demonstrate that the rape of women is systemic within territory controlled by Islamic State.⁶⁵⁵ The framework of the Islamic State's governance is underpinned by the *Hudud*, this is a code of 15 "crimes against God".⁶⁵⁶ Islamic State has used these to inform its interpretation of *Shari'a* law. The *Hudud* is the code that proscribes such things as death for adultery and apostasy, amputation for theft, and floggings.⁶⁵⁷ This code is enforced within the Islamic State by the *al-Hisba*, a religious police force.⁶⁵⁸ William McCants argues that the Islamic State used the *Hudud* as a means of control: "The Islamic State never really controlled any cities so it couldn't do much to improve local economies. But it could dress up its terrorism in religious garb to subdue the locals and lay claim to statehood".⁶⁵⁹ Whilst the Islamic State used the *Hudud* to impose physical control, its sophisticated use of media controlled its narrative.

The most remarkable tool for the Islamic State, is its media arm. It is a prolific and sophisticated user of social media.⁶⁶⁰ It is this that sets it apart from its predecessors and contemporaries, except for AQAP who have been equally adept with its use of media. As an organisation, the Islamic State has fully leveraged the capabilities of a networked world. Its propaganda is produced to very high standard in multiple languages and disseminated across multiple channels to fellow travelers.⁶⁶¹ As Graeme Wood points out: "The Islamic State's self-messaging is suffused with religious

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid., 225.

⁶⁵⁶ Griffin, 86.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁹ William McCants, *The Isis Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 38.

⁶⁶⁰ Burke, 102.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid.

language, tropes, and pomp.”⁶⁶² The recruiting videos produced by the Islamic State rival anything produced by a Western military, with the exception that the Islamic State revels in its brutality. As a group, Islamic State stands out amongst its jihadist peers for its weaving of ultra-violence and mass media.⁶⁶³ Its media covers a range of staging and pageantry for the beheadings and immolations that it broadcasts, such as the staging of its victims in Guantanamo style orange jumpsuits.⁶⁶⁴ The use of social media allows followers to engage with and be complicit in Islamic State’s atrocities.⁶⁶⁵ There has been acknowledgement from both the British and American administration’s that such beheading videos have had an impact on their respective policy choices.⁶⁶⁶ It is plausible that military action has in part been curtailed due to a desire not to see captured soldiers in such videos; highlighting the importance of such visual and social media in contemporary conflicts.⁶⁶⁷

As a proto-state, the Islamic State has developed a cult of martyrdom and suicide. It regularly uses violence to intimidate and control and runs a semi-command economy that controls the means of substance for all under its auspices.⁶⁶⁸ It lacks skilled workers. Furthermore, education and information is exclusively used to enforce the group’s leadership viewpoints. Dissent and alternative views or beliefs are not tolerated and are savagely extinguished.⁶⁶⁹ Although it proposes to be an alternative to nation states, in many respects Islamic State resembles those that it wishes to replace.

⁶⁶² Graeme Wood, *The Way of Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2017), 73.

⁶⁶³ Weiss and Hassan, 32.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁵ Burke, 102.

⁶⁶⁶ Simone Molin Friis, "Beyond Anything We Have Ever Seen': Beheading Videos and the Visibility of Violence in the War against Isis," *International Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2015): 726.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁸ Burke, 103.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid.

Although Islamic State through its rhetoric has stated its desire to recreate the Caliphates of old, it is a contemporary phenomenon. Its existence and structure is a product of the specific security environment that exists currently in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁷⁰

Despite a shared ideology and worldview, Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State demonstrate that Salafist-jihadist come in many shades and varieties.⁶⁷¹ Whilst *Jabhat al-Nusra* remains linked to and is descended from Islamic State, it has consistently touted its identity as a Syrian group, and grounded itself in the mosaic of Syrian society.⁶⁷² The essential difference in which *Jabhat al-Nusra* differentiates itself from Islamic State is that *al-Nusra* is more nationalistic in the way in which it expresses its core Salafist-jihadist ideology. *Al-Nusra* has adopted a deliberate strategy of linking itself to the goals of the Syrian uprising, and of emphasizing the Syrian roots of its leadership.⁶⁷³ Most recently the group has taken steps to rebrand itself and to distance itself from its parent group, *al-Qaeda*.⁶⁷⁴ On 28 July 2016, *Jabhat al-Nusra* announced that it would be dissolving and reforming as *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* (the Front for the Conquest of the Levant).⁶⁷⁵ The group would undergo a further transformation in January 2017, when it announced that it was merging with four other groups, *Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zanki* (Nour al-Din Zenki Movement), *Liwa al-Haqq* (Right Brigade), *Jabhat Ansar al-Din* (The Supporters of the Religion Front) and *Jaysh al-Sunnah* (Army of the Year) to form *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (Assembly for Liberation of the Levant).⁶⁷⁶ Headed by Hashem al-Sheikh, who had resigned from the leadership of

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁷¹ Abboud, 175.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

⁶⁷³ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁴ Cole Bunzel, "Jabhat Al-Nusra's Rebranding in the Eyes of the Islamic State," *Jihadica*, <http://www.jihadica.com/jabhat-al-nusras-rebranding/>.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda and Allies Announce 'New Entity' in Syria," *The Long War Journal*, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/al-qaeda-and-allies-announce-new-entity-in-syria.php>.

Ahrar al-Sham, the merger is seen as a further attempt by *al-Nusra* to disguise its links to *al-Qaeda*.⁶⁷⁷

Al-Nusra has been a significant part of the rebellion against the al-Assad regime, and has created an administrative apparatus, along with its military wing, to rule the areas it controls.⁶⁷⁸ As an organisation, *al-Nusra* has sought to turn military cooperation with rebel groups into a shared administration. By doing so it has been able to gain influence in regions in which it is militarily weak and has little presence.⁶⁷⁹ As a strategy, this willingness to enter into alliances with other anti-regime forces has expanded the geographical reach of *al-Nusra*.⁶⁸⁰ Unlike Islamic State which has pursued a top down imposition of the Caliphate, *al-Nusra* has implemented a more grassroots strategy by not confining its actions to a delineated territory but rather carrying out actions across Syria.⁶⁸¹ This has not only ensured that *al-Nusra* retains a degree of mobility making it more difficult to target, but has enabled the group to recruit from a range of Syria's society, thereby enhancing its image as a Syrian group.⁶⁸² *Al-Nusra* has also followed *al-Qaeda* approach to recruitment and is highly selective in who it recruits.⁶⁸³ Prospective recruits must have a *tazqiyya* (personal recommendation) from an existing member of the group before they can be considered.⁶⁸⁴ The group has also pursued a policy of quality over quantity for its recruits; this has ensured a high degree of discipline and tactical competency amongst its forces.⁶⁸⁵ By being very selective in its recruitment, *al-Nusra* also ensures a high degree of internal security, protecting it

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸ Abboud, 176.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

⁶⁸² Lister, 116.

⁶⁸³ Ibid., 104.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid.

from external threats.⁶⁸⁶ *Al-Nusra* has been able to establish itself in rebel areas and establish administrative authority.⁶⁸⁷ Although *al-Nusra* has made efforts to provide social services and establish *Shari'a* courts, unlike Islamic State and the Kurds, the group does not control contiguous territory and is reliant on its allies for support.⁶⁸⁸

This need for alliances has meant that *al-Nusra* has had to temper its Salafist-jihadist beliefs with a need to gain local support to form cooperative governing councils with other rebel groups.⁶⁸⁹ In the views of a US based Syrian analyst quoted by Andrew Hoskins: “It doesn’t want to be hated...It doesn’t necessarily want to rule [territory] in spite of the Syrian people...”⁶⁹⁰ This has resulted in mixed-authority councils in which *al-Nusra* shares governance with other groups, an example being the Aleppo *Shari'a* Council.⁶⁹¹ The Council oversees the public administration of areas under the control of its members and has offices dealing with the provision of health, education, water and social welfare.⁶⁹² Whilst the Council consists of representative from differing rebel groups, due to their comparative weaknesses, it is dominated by *al-Nusra*.⁶⁹³ The success of these councils has been such that it has enabled *al-Nusra* to recreate them across the rebel held areas.⁶⁹⁴ *Al-Nusra* has demonstrated success in its attempts at governance, due to its flexibility in adapting to local conditions and co-opting local traditions and power structures.⁶⁹⁵ By inserting themselves into existing rebel networks, and through the exploitation of those networks, *al-Nusra* has been able to gain and

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁶⁸⁷ Abboud, 176.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid., 177.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁰ Hosken, 162.

⁶⁹¹ Abboud, 177.

⁶⁹² Ibid.

⁶⁹³ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., 178.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

ensure continued support for the organisation.⁶⁹⁶ *Al-Nusra*'s moderate approach (in comparison to the Islamic State), aligns closely to Osama bin Laden's guidance on governance.⁶⁹⁷ Bin Laden, before his death, had urged *al-Qaeda*'s affiliates not to establish Islamic governments before they had popular support, to prioritise their subjects well-being and to apply *Hudud* leniently.⁶⁹⁸ In its approach to governance *al-Nusra*, for the most part, appears to be following this guidance. By forming a network of alliances and developing grass root support, *al-Nusra* is well positioned to fill any gap that the defeat of the Islamic State leaves.

Iraq and Syria are not failed states, but they are weakened. The al-Assad regime remained in control of a rump Syrian state and with the advent of Russian and Iranian intervention has regained control of most of Syria. The Iraqi government although it faced a significant insurgency, with US support retained control over Iraq. However, in the case of Syria significant gaps still exist that can be exploited by groups such as *al-Nusra* and Islamic State. The Kurdish forces remain in control of the Kurdish region in Iraq and have made gains in Syria.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁷ McCants, 68.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid.

Conclusion

The Islamic State is a symptom of the security conditions of the Middle East. A history of intervention, invasion, civil wars, economic failings, and the predatory behaviour of both internal and external actors, has created an ideal environment for the growth of violent non-state actors.⁶⁹⁹ Internal power struggles and sectarian agendas have provided the conditions for conflict, with the result that as populations lose faith in their own governments they have turned to other actors for support, legitimate or otherwise.⁷⁰⁰ The weakening of both the Syrian and Iraqi states has allowed groups like Islamic State to take advantage of the situation. Islamic State has been able to use the incoherent opposition to al-Assad to further its own objectives, exploiting the rebel's fractionalisation to seize and hold ground in eastern Syria.⁷⁰¹ Furthermore, Islamic State has deliberately hindered the opposition forces in Syria, unless they gave their support to the group. In establishing their version of a Caliphate, Islamic State has been prepared to fight against any force that stood in the way, rebel, or Syrian regime.⁷⁰²

Using local networks, resources and the porousness of borders, Islamic State has been able to seize control of large portions of Iraq and Syria.⁷⁰³ By positioning itself as the protector of Islam, the Islamic State has been successful in attracting recruits, including substantial numbers of foreign fighters. The Islamic State's pretensions to statehood have permitted it a veneer of legitimacy.⁷⁰⁴ One of its principle appeals has

⁶⁹⁹ Mabon and Royle, 154.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ Fishman, 180.

⁷⁰² Ibid.

⁷⁰³ Mabon and Royle, 155.

⁷⁰⁴ Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, 139.

been its ability to provide public goods. Using funds from the sale of oil and hostages, it has been able to provide public goods and services.⁷⁰⁵ Using compulsion it has forced doctors, engineers and educators to aid in the construction of its Caliphate.⁷⁰⁶ Through its control of oil fields and food reserves, Islamic State has ensured the compliance of the population under its control.⁷⁰⁷ The groups sophisticated use of social media has both horrified and seduced, its propaganda has widely disseminated Islamic State's ideology and attracted supporters.⁷⁰⁸

Whilst the Islamic State has enjoyed a lengthy period of success, it has come under increasing pressure. Islamic State will most likely share the fate of *al-Qaeda*, in that its capability will be significantly degraded. But as with *al-Qaeda*, a weakened Islamic State will not mean the end to Salafist-jihadist militancy. As an ideology, Salafist-jihadism has remained extremely resilient.⁷⁰⁹ Salafist-jihadism with its millenarian political vision will continue to appeal to the alienated and oppressed.⁷¹⁰ Groups such as Islamic State have grown embolden by the civil conflicts that have arisen in the wake of post-Arab Spring revolutions, the chaos has led to the rise of militant groups that espouse the Salafist-jihadist ideology.⁷¹¹ There are more than half a dozen wars being fought across the wider Middle East, Syria, Iraq, Somalia Libya and Yemen. In all these countries, a government is fighting a guerrilla war in which the government can only maintain limited control or has completely been disintegrated.⁷¹² The continuing conflicts in the region have provided the conditions for the growth of

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁸ Weiss and Hassan, 32.

⁷⁰⁹ Maher, 211.

⁷¹⁰ Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, 119.

⁷¹¹ Maher, 211.

⁷¹² Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 425.

such Salafist-jihadist groups as Islamic State and *al-Nusra*.⁷¹³ It will continue to provide an environment for others to pursue separatist or sectarian agendas.⁷¹⁴ For the Kurds, the security vacuum has provided the opportunity to pursue greater autonomy, and perhaps independence, through consolidating the Kurdish population.⁷¹⁵ However, such moves risk reigniting the decades old conflict between the Kurds and Turkey.

There is a need to reduce the number of actors who instigate and perpetuate the chaos in Iraq and Syria. The support of Russia, Iran, and to a lesser extent China for al-Assad's regime has created a state of political paralysis and competing strategic objectives have added to the complexity. For instance, both the United States and Iran want to defeat Islamic State, but neither wants the other to be advantaged in doing so.⁷¹⁶ Russia has used its support of al-Assad to re-establish itself as a global power and to break US domination of the post-Cold War order.⁷¹⁷ Whilst order and stability is much needed within the region, this should not come at the expense of political and religious freedoms. The re-imposition of authoritarianism and dictatorship would only instigate a continuance of the past. By the time of the Arab Spring in 2011, the nationalist regimes that seized power in the decades between 1960 and 1980, had become corrupt family dynasties.⁷¹⁸ The revolutions that have followed the Arab Spring have led to a change in the regional balance of power. The wealthy oil nations, such as Saudi Arabia, have sought to claim the mantle of leadership of the Middle East.⁷¹⁹ Iran too, has used the current conflicts to reassert itself as a regional power, and to leverage its position as a

⁷¹³ Ibid., 426.

⁷¹⁴ Mabon and Royle, 155.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid.

⁷¹⁶ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 431.

⁷¹⁷ Phillips, 220.

⁷¹⁸ Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, 432.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid.

means of reintegrating into the wider international community. Turkey which may have looked to play a major leadership role in the region, has fallen prey to Erdogan's version of Islamism and conservatism, in the process risks reigniting the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Turkey, as was the case in Egypt under President Morsi, has demonstrated in the case of the Islamists, the closer they move to power the more regressive they become.⁷²⁰

As the Islamic State edges closer to destruction in its current form, it creates a space for a resurgent and arguably more astute form of *al-Qaeda* in the shape of *al-Nusra*. The nature of Islamic State's violence, through its campaigns against non-Sunnis has redrawn the Middle East. A situation now exists that none of Syria's or Iraq's individual sects, Sunni, Kurds, Shia, Christian or Alawite, wants to find out what happens when it is at the mercy of another.⁷²¹ There are no black and whites, for the cause of how the Iraq, Syria and the wider Middle East has reached such a point. But what is known is the legacy that Islamic State will leave behind it, is a cycle of ongoing mistrust, chaos and violence, that will take decades to unravel.

⁷²⁰ Ibid., 433.

⁷²¹ Ibid.

Appendix 1 Timeline of Iraq and Syrian Conflicts 2011 -2017⁷²²

2011

Syria

Early march protests and arrests in Dera'a precipitate Syria's slide into conflict. By late March protests are widespread across Syria. Early May shows the first signs of armed insurrection by the burgeoning Syrian rebellion. During the period March to June, the al-Assad regime begins releasing Islamist and Salafist-jihadists from Syrian prisons. By mid to late 2011 the Free Syrian Army (FSA) emerges. Late 2011, Western nations begin to call for regime change in Syria.

Iraq

The government of al-Maliki experiences backlash from Iraq's Sunni population over its sectarian policies. Islamic State in Iraq begins a period of recovery.

2012

Syria

Early 2012 sees the first appearance of Jabhat al-Nusra. Sectarian divisions deepen with Syria as the regime digs in. By mid-year Syrian rebel forces make major inroads against the regime, securing positions around Damascus and Aleppo. By the end of 2012 the al-Assad regime has ceded the north-east of Syria to Kurdish forces. Iran begins organising militia forces in support of the al-Assad regime.

⁷²² Timeline sourced from Harris, xiii - xviii.

Iraq

Islamic State in Iraq intensifies its campaign of terror, attacking security forces and co-opting Iraqi tribes in Anbar and other majority Sunni provinces. As ISI provokes sectarian attacks, Shia militias begin to form. Throughout the year the Iraqi security situation continues to destabilise. Iraqi prime minister al-Maliki continues attacks on sectarian political rivals.

2013

Syria

Rebel and regime forces reach a stalemate in the major urban centres. Rebels take al-Raqqa. Jabhat al-Nusra breaks away from ISI, declaring loyalty to al-Qaeda central. ISI renames itself as ISIS and commences attacks on Syrian rebel forces. Hezbollah makes first open appearance in the Syrian conflict in the battle for al-Qusayr. September marks Syrian regimes first use of chemical weapons. Late 2011 ISIS captures al-Raqqa and Islamist and non-Islamist form groups to combat ISIS

Iraq

The security situation continues to deteriorate throughout the year. The Iraqi Army launches attacks on Sunni agitators. ISIS continues to position itself as the primary Sunni opposition group, eliminating other Sunni opposition groups. ISIS continues to grow in strength and seize territory.

2014

Syria

Peace talks at Geneva collapse. Syrian rebels in conjunction with Jabhat al-Nusra take ground from ISIS in north-west Syria but lose Deir al-Zor to ISIS. Syrian regime forces recapture territory from the Syrian rebels and regain control of Homs. ISIS beheads US hostage's journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff.

Iraq

ISIS pushes back Iraqi government forces in al-Anbar province seizing Fallujah. ISIS makes major gains across Iraq and Syria and by mid-year has declared the establishment of a Caliphate. ISIS attacks the Yazidis and Kurdish forces. The US intervenes on behalf of the KRG and commences bombing of ISIS forces. Al-Maliki is replaced as Iraqi prime minister by Haydar al-Abadi. Late 2014 sees battles between ISIS and PYD with the Kurdish forces recapturing Sinjar from ISIS.

2015

Syria

Hezbollah and Syrian regime suffer setbacks against rebel forces. Saudi Arabia and Turkey support a Jabhat al-Nusra/FSA alliance. Kurdish forces push ISIS out of Kobane. ISIS seize Palmyra. PYD make territorial gains in north-eastern Syria. Russia commences bombing of Syrian rebels. Increase presence of Russian and Iranian forces bolster regime forces in Syria. Turkey shoots down a Russian aircraft that it claimed

overflowed Turkish airspace. Russia denied this as Turkish-Russian relations deteriorate. UNSC pushes for peace plan in Syria

Iraq

The Iraqi battlefield remains fluid as both ISIS and government forces make gains and losses. Iraqi forces are still reliant on Shia militias in the fight against ISIS. Kurdish forces continue to make territorial gains in Iraq.

2016

Syria

PYD makes territorial gains in Afrin. Syrian regime forces make gains in Damascus advancing against rebel forces. Mid 2016 the US strengthens its ties with PYD under the guise of the SDF, Mid 2016 Turkey repairs its relationship with Russia ahead of Turkish forces pushing into northern Syria. Syrian regime backed by Russia lays siege to Aleppo. PYD forces back by US support advance on ISIS forces at al-Raqqa.

Iraq

Ramadi and Fallujah are recaptured from ISIS. PMU recognised as an official part of the Iraqi army. Late 2016 Iraqi and Kurdish forces begin assault against ISIS forces entrenched in Mosul.

2017

Syria

In April, the US launches an attack on Syrian regime forces after the al-Assad regime conducts a chemical weapon attack on Syrian rebels. As ISIS loses ground in Syria regime and rebel forces aim to gain ground on each other. US intervenes on behalf of Syrian rebels as regime attacks rebel forces.

Iraq

Iraqi forces push ISIS out of Mosul consolidating Iraqi government control in Iraq.

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