

# **What is Behind ISIS?**

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***Declaration:***

“I declare that this thesis is my own account of my own research. It contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any university”.

**signature**

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Date of declaration.

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## **Abstract**

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) was formed in April 2013. It was an attempt to affect a merger between the Islamic State of Iraq's Al-Qaeda, formed in October 2006, and Jabhat Al-Nusra. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi established the Islamic State of Iraq-Syria (ISIS, or commonly referred to as Daesh), which has since become one of the largest armed extremist groups in Iraq and Syria. The ISIS adopted the Jihadi-Salafi ideology (Takfir), and its organizers aimed to install an Islamic Caliphate based on Sharia Law that was rooted in the 7th century. The group uses a sophisticated media wing to attract citizens from neighboring countries and to promote reactionary politics and religious fundamentalism. The ISIS is known for its mass killings and for carrying out public executions, crucifixions, and other violent acts. The ISIS has developed a strategy to generate revenues to fund its operations. This strategy involves producing oil, collecting taxes, stealing and selling antiques, extorting money from people, kidnapping for ransom, smuggling, and imposing levies on farmers' crops. The ISIS has spread throughout the Middle East due to a lack of effective leadership, dysfunctional and non-representative institutions, and weak governance in this region. The ISIS has also taken advantage of sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia, particularly in Iraq. The ISIS has thrived within the context of a politically dysfunctional Middle East and badly divided Muslim world. In recent years, the ISIS has expanded into North Africa and to parts of Europe, where it appears to have a huge following among disgruntled Muslims.

## Introduction

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) was formed in April 2013. It was an attempt to affect a merger between the Islamic State of Iraq's Al-Qaeda, formed in October 2006, and the Front Victory in Syria (Jabhat Al-Nusra) (Malik et. al 2015). However, the Jabhat Al-Nusra immediately rejected this merger, announced by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. The leader of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, also ordered the merger to be canceled. Al-Baghdadi disagreed, and established the Islamic State of Iraq-Syria (ISIS, or commonly referred to as Daesh), which has since become one of the largest armed extremist groups in Iraq and Syria. The ISIS adopted the Jihadi-Salafi ideology (Takfir)<sup>1</sup>, and its organizers aimed to recall the "Islamic Caliphate and the application of Sharia."<sup>2</sup> The turmoil in Syria and Iraq created a social and political void that enabled Jihadi groups like the ISIS to thrive. The ISIS has demonstrated in Iraq and Syria that it is the strongest and most dynamic of the myriad of armed groups by seizing control of large swathes of territory. Shortly after the defeat of Iraqi forces and the occupation of Mosul in June 2014, the ISIS, announced the establishment of a Caliphate and changed its name to Islamic State (IS).

The ISIS used its sophisticated media wing to attract citizens from neighboring countries. The group argues that it is implementing Islamic Sharia Law that is rooted in the 7th century; in other words, the Islamic Law that came as a command from God to Muslims showing them their duties and how to be good Muslims by virtue of their religious belief (Friedman 2014).

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<sup>1</sup>The Jihadi-Salafi ideology: This term is given to some of the extreme political Islam groups which adopt Jihad approach to change. This movement declares that it follows the approach of early Muslims ancestor and Jihad one of its pillars. Also, the application of jihad that must be by the Muslims against the occupying enemy and against the ruling regime which doesn't rule by Islamic law and governed by human-made laws or system characterized by injustice and oppression.

<sup>2</sup>Islamic Caliphate and the application of Sharia: According to Sowerwine (2009) "The term "caliph" (khalifah in Arabic) is generally regarded to mean "successor of the prophet Muhammad," while "caliphate" (Khilafah in Arabic) denotes the office of the political leader of the Muslim community (ummah) or state, particularly during the period from 632 to 1258. Although the caliph was not considered to possess spiritual authority as Muhammad had, the caliph presided over a state governed by Islamic law (Sharia) whose territories constituted the "abode of Islam" (dar al-Islam). Thus, the caliph served as the symbol of the supremacy of the Sharia (Islamic Law), as commander of the faithful (amir al-mu'minin) in his capacity to both defend and expand these lands and as leader of prayers (Imam), thereby clothing the caliphate with religious meaning."

The ISIS is known for its mass killings and for carrying out public executions, crucifixions, and other violent acts. It uses modern communication tools like social media to promote reactionary politics and religious fundamentalism. They hold political views that favor, as they claim, an ideological return to the *status quo ante*, the pristine political community founded by Prophet Mohammed and his immediate successors. That ideology, they argue, is absent from the modern *status quo* of Muslim societies. In order to restore the *status quo ante*, ISIS fighters have destroyed holy sites and valuable antiquities that they consider un-Islamic and polluted by idolatry. The ISIS controls huge areas in Syria and Iraq that stretch from the Mediterranean coast to the south of Baghdad.

The ISIS also practices modern day slavery. According to the United Nations News Center (2016), "Most of the enslaved are women and children from the Yazidi community, but some are from other ethnic and religious minority communities." The ISIS considers these enslaved women and children as 'captures' or 'spoils' of war. In this war, the ISIS believe that the final battle would take place in Dabiq, Syria, where the Prophet Mohammed supposedly predicted that the armies of Islam and the Roman Empire would meet for a final showdown. The ISIS believes that this final battle would precede the end of time and lead to the triumph of Islam.

ISIS has developed a strategy to generate revenues to fund its operations. This strategy involves producing oil, collecting taxes, stealing and selling antiques, extorting money from people, kidnapping for ransom, smuggling, and imposing levies on farmers' crops. The leader of ISIS is Abu Baker Al-Baghdadi, who is also known as Abu Du'a. The US military had jailed Al-Baghdadi in Bucca Camp prison in the south of Iraq for several months in 2003. In 2004, Al-Baghdadi was released from prison. After he proclaimed the creation of the Islamic State, he started using the title Al-Khalifah (The Caliph) to signal his position among his followers and in the media (CNN 2016).

The ISIS has spread throughout the Middle East due to a lack of effective leadership, dysfunctional and non-representative institutions, and weak governance in this region. The ISIS has also taken advantage of sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia, particularly in Iraq. The ISIS has thrived within the context of a politically dysfunctional Middle East and badly divided Muslim world. In recent years, the ISIS has expanded into North Africa and to parts of Europe, where it appears to have a huge following among disgruntled Muslims. The Paris terror attacks

in 2015 and several other attacks since then have represented a transformative moment for the ISIS agenda. These terror attacks were launched not only in Middle Eastern countries but also in several countries in Africa and Europe. To prevent such attacks and to effectively counter the ISIS requires the international community to be fully mobilized and for regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and Iran to come together to take joint political and military actions. However, the reality is that there is no effective coalition regionally among the Middle Eastern countries, or internationally among the major powers confronting ISIS. Russia has its agenda for Syria and supports the Assad regime. The Syrian government forces and the Russian military have been attacking ISIS, but this coalition is not enough to confront the terrorism of ISIS. Turkey, itself a victim of ISIS terror, appears to be more concerned with preventing Kurdish empowerment and separatism in Syria than hitting ISIS. And no external power, including the United States, wants to deploy a large ground force to defeat ISIS.

The ISIS terrorist organization has spawned controversy and debate since it emerged in Syria. There is much disagreement within the international community regarding its origins, practices, goals and connections. Consequently, many people around the world cannot fully understand the real identity, objectives, and engagements of ISIS because of confusing information about it. Some consider it a branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria; some deem it an independent organization that seeks to establish an Islamic state; others view it as a creation of the Syrian regime intended to delegitimize the opposition and its factions; while some analysts even consider the organization a creation of US and Israeli intelligence agencies. This paper will look at these perspectives, and explore two major questions. First, what are the primary factors behind the creation of ISIS? Second, how did ISIS manage to consolidate its control in Syria and Iraq and spread its influence in the Middle East and beyond?

## **Chapter One: The Rise of Islamic State of Iraq-Syria: What were the Primary Factors behind the Creation and Spread of ISIS?**

### **The Background to the Creation of ISIS:**

If we look at the circumstances that Iraq has experienced during the past fourteen years, we can see the political and security instability and the economic recession that accompanied all phases of successive governments after 2003. Since the coming to power of Nuri al-Maliki as prime minister in 2006, Iraq entered a new phase. This new phase was characterized by the inefficiency of the military leaders in holding the ground accompanied by a political and military uprising by the Iraqi Sunni community, which felt marginalized and excluded from power under a Shia-dominated Iraq. Sunni protest rallies had their epicenter in Mosul and extended from Hawijato the Syrian-Jordanian borders. The al-Maliki regime responded to the Sunni insurgency through repression and abuse of the protesters by military force. This led the Sunni community first into the arms of Al Qaeda and eventually into the arms of the ISIS.

### **ISIS is a Splinter Group of Al-Qaeda:**

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) was founded in April 2013. After Osama bin Laden was killed by US Special Forces in May 2011, serious tactical differences emerged between Ayman al-Zawahiri, who succeeded bin Laden as leader of Al Qaeda, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who became the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq after Abu Musabal-Zarqawi was killed in a US drone strike. In May 2011 al-Zawahiri proposed the idea of a merger between Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Jabhat Al-Nusra in Syria. Although al-Zawahiri later cancelled the formal merger, Al Qaeda and Jabhat Al-Nusra continued to cooperate closely in Syria. The Telegraph (2014) stated: "After the 'merger', al-Zawahiri was quiet until, a month or so later, he annulled it and called for Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS to work together in jihad, but not as one. Al-Baghdadi ignored him and had the chief mediator between the two groups assassinated." Al-Baghdadi did not agree with Al-Qaeda's position and established the ISIS, which quickly became one of the largest extremist groups in Iraq and Syria.

The reasons as to why Al Baghdadi came out of Al Qaeda and formed the ISIS can be found in some of Osama bin Laden's correspondence that were captured by US Special Forces from bin



Laden's hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in May 2011. The correspondence revealed that Al Qaeda's main aim was to wage jihad by launching terrorist attacks against the US and the West. Osama bin Laden was not concerned with the formation of an Islamic caliphate; in fact, he urged his affiliates to focus on the real enemy – the United States of America. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, however, preferred a different approach. His main aim was to project power in the Middle East and beyond. To effectively do this, he targeted the Bashar al-Assad government in Syria and Shi'ite regime in Iraq. Moreover, unlike Al Qaeda, which preferred dramatic attacks, al-Baghdadi and the ISIS focused on territorial conquest in order to establish and consolidate the Islamic Caliphate.

The origins of ISIS dates back to 2004, when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi created an organization called "Tawhid and Jihad"<sup>3</sup> and declared allegiance to Al Qaeda, which was at the time led by Osama bin Laden.

This organization became al-Qaeda's representative in the region. The organization emerged in Iraq during the American occupation as a Sunni jihadi group to fight the US military. This made it attractive to a large number of Iraqi youths who were seeking to end the US occupation. It rapidly expanded its influence and membership, and became one of the most powerful and largest militia groups in Iraq.

In 2006, a military organization called 'Islamic State in Iraq' was formed that brought all the major fundamentalist groups in Iraq together. The organization was led by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi who was a former member of Al Qaeda (Khalaf 2014), and its main operations were directed at occupying U.S. military forces. In October 2006, the organization was dissolved and replaced by the Islamic State of Iraq. On Monday, 19 April 2010, US and Iraqi forces launched a military operation in the Thar Thar<sup>4</sup> area that targeted a house where Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir were hiding. After violent clashes between the sides, both leaders were killed. One week later the organization acknowledged the deaths of these two leaders in an

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<sup>3</sup>Tawhid and Jihad: Monotheism and Jihadist group of fighters who were followers to [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#). It started in Iraq in 2003 as an al Qaeda allegiance.

<sup>4</sup>Thar Thar: An Iraqi city which is administratively followed to al Anbar governorate.

Internet statement. Ten days after the acknowledgement, the Council of the State met and chose Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its Caliph and Nasser Liden Allah Suleiman as its minister of war.

The crises in Syria began due to the repression of demonstrations that were held against President Bashar al-Assad's government. It quickly morphed into an armed rebellion that was composed of many factions and armed groups. In late 2011, the Front Victory was formed and was led by Abu Mohammed Joulani. The Front Victory continued to fight the Assad regime, but soon intelligence reports emerged that demonstrated its intellectual and organizational relationship with the Islamic State of Iraq.

On April 21, 2011, an audio recording attributed to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared that the Front Victory was an extension of the Islamic State in Iraq, and that both organizations would fight together under the name of Islamic State of Iraq-Syria (ISIS). Since that time, the founders of the extremist movement have worked to build an airtight administrative structure and increase their overall strength to achieve their goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate.

### **Why did ISIS Spread Rapidly?**

ISIS as an organization and 'idea' was able to spread itself within the Middle East due to three key reasons: the lack of effective secular leadership; dysfunctional and unrepresentative governing institutions; and sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shia Muslims<sup>5</sup>.

#### **1. A lack of effective secular leadership in the Middle East**

The Middle Eastern countries are suffering from an old intellectual crisis that began with the fall of the Caliphate and the separation between the political leadership and intellectual leadership within nations. That led Muslims (Sunni and Shi'ia) to have different understanding of Islam (Kramer 2013;Morgan and Lawton 2007). And these different understandings affected the ways Muslims thought of identity, community and religious or secular divide. Consequently, many Muslims came to regard democracy, secularism, and liberty as alien to Islam(Kramer 2013). So, the backwardness of the Middle East is not due to the values, purposes and aims of Islam, but

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<sup>5</sup>Sunnis and Shia: The major two sects in Islam.

rather to Muslim thought and reason(Lamontet. al 2015). For these reasons, secularism has failed miserably in the advancement of the Middle East.

In addition, the separation between Muslim nations' intellectual leadership and political leadership opened the door to social diseases to enter the body of the nation and the isolation of the intellectual leadership from social responsibility. Therefore, while the 'Muslim mind' narrowed in the corridors of mosques, the political leadership deprived itself of the existence of intellectual services that could provide it with thought, solutions and policies. Consequently, throughout the history of the Middle East, the political leadership became more and more despotic and authoritarian(Lamont et. al. 2015). The Muslim mind has therefore become incapable of critical consideration and effective vision, because the political and intellectual leaders have worked to subdue and control the nation physically and psychologically. In addition, the Muslim mind has become captive to these leaders, and thus misses the right vision and mix between thought and beliefs, religion and history, principles and values, and between concepts and traditions(Morgan and Lawton 2007). The weakness of political and social institutions and the deterioration of institutions and public policies divided the Middle East into weak states. This ultimately has led to the failure of secular politics and leadership. Also, it seems that there is not a deep understanding of the concept of secularism in the Middle East. Secularism refers to the institutional separation between religion and the State; in the absence of a proper understanding and appreciation of secularism, religion, law, and politics have always been closely intertwined in the Middle East(Kramer 2013). In fact, Muslims in the Middle East always consider that any separation between the State and religion is an offence against Islam and a violation to Muslims' dignity. They believe that the concept of secularism is foreign in origin and closely associated with leftist ideologies(Kramer 2013).

A case in point is Iraq. It has been beset by political instability and a general lack of security. The country has faced economic stagnation due to wasteful spending and poor planning by successive governments. The Iraqi people are held captive by their leaders, who miss the right vision and mix between thought and beliefs, religion and history, principles and values, and between concepts and traditions. Their weakness of Iraq's political and social institutions, the deterioration of the state's power and poor public policies have transformed Iraq into a weak

state. This has ultimately led to the failure of secular politics and leadership. It is very clear that religion, law, and politics are closely intertwined in Iraq especially in present days.

## **2. Dysfunctional and unrepresentative governing institutions**

Governing institutions in the Middle Eastern countries are authoritarian in culture and rely on networks of power, patronage and control. As a result, these institutions are often dysfunctional and lack legitimacy, which increases security challenges within the state. In this context, Guzansky and Berti (2012, p1) have stated:"The post-revolutionary period in countries where leaders have been toppled has been replete with challenges, including the exacerbation of pre-existing divisions, rendering extremely difficult the creation of strong and functioning states."Therefore, the weaknesses of governing institutions enhance the challenges and divisions with the state.

Since the US invasion of 2003, Iraq has been beset by political instability and a general lack of security. Most government departments and institutions (barring a few) have lost valuable data, records and documents(Allawi 2007).This has severely affected the work of these institutions and departments. It has also increased the level of dysfunction within these institutions. According to Allawi (2007,p 349):"The Iraqi state combined the worst features of a centralized bureaucracy with vestiges of the occupation, and a near collapse of the information, reporting and control mechanisms that underpin any functioning government authority."

The country has also faced economic stagnation due to wasteful spending, poor planning, looting and patronage by successive governments(Allawi 2007). In addition, many Iraqi Sunnis considered themselves marginalized by the Shiite government in Baghdad after they were denied prominent roles in the military and other state institutions that they had historically controlled. These issues combined to contribute to the rapid and unexpected fall of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, to ISIS militants(Mostafa 2017). That region also included Camp Ghazali, which was one of the largest American military bases in the country. Many government and army members escaped from the city to the Esky<sup>6</sup>area, and many residents of Mosul welcomed ISIS because they were fed up with the previous government. The fall of Mosul and Camp Ghazali, which contained a large number of weapons, paved the way for ISIS, after thousands of Mosul's

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<sup>6</sup>Esky: Iraqi town 50 km to the North-East of Mosel District.

residents joined the group, to move further south and east. The group did not stop until they controlled Arab areas west of Kirkuk (Hawija) and south (Sharqat, Tikrit and down to the outskirts of Samarra). The other surprise that accompanied the ISIS progress in Iraq was their movement east of Mosul(Wood 2015). This included Khazar and Makhmour (Kurdish), as they faced little resistance from Kurdish forces (Wood 2015).

These victories resulted in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announcing the establishment of a Caliphate from the Grand Mosque (Al Hadba') in Mosul. This was a turning point for the militant group in Iraq. It convinced huge numbers of people that it could protect them from the Shiite racist behavior. The ISIS also gained from the expertise and military hardware brought by the former Republican Guard officers, who had escaped from American and government forces after their pleas to be included in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq's government was turned down by the Bush administration.

### **3.Sectarian divisions within Islam**

Islam is the second largest religion in the world after Christianity, but it is not a monolithic religion. Sectarian divisions within Islam are a reality and these divisions enhance the growth of terrorist organizations in the Middle East. Terrorist organizations like ISIS have exploited sectarian divisions within Islam and attacked sects like Shias and Alawites in Iraq and Syria. This has resulted in sectarian polarization within the populations of Iraq and Syria, with ISIS emerging as the principal defender of the Sunni people. The ISIS propaganda that Sunnis are under threat from the Shia-dominated government in post-Saddam Iraq found particular resonance among mostly Sunni population in western and northern Iraq, particularly in the city of Mosul. However, when ISIS came to control the city, they showed their real terror face by killing anybody who opposed them. From Mosul, the ISIS gradually expanded their operations and came to eventually control a large area comprising western and northern Iraq and eastern and northern Syria. In this context, Iho (2016, p3) has stated:"The Sadr City and al-Muqdadaya attacks represented the deadliest bombings carried out by the group in Iraq in 2016 to date, and demonstrated the Islamic State's ongoing capacity to stage major attacks outside of areas under its territorial control."

After Nuri al-Maliki took over as prime minister in 2006, Iraq entered into a new phase that was marked by incompetent military efforts and land maintenance issues accompanied by political conflicts between different groups. For example, many Sunnis felt marginalized by the new government because it excluded Sunnis from government high positions, minimized government services in Sunni neighborhoods and encouraged violent attacks on Sunnis by Shia mobs (Al-Ali 2014). As a result, the sectarian divide became very difficult and uncontrollable, and it became much easier for extremist groups like the ISIS to influence the Sunni population. These circumstances were also accompanied by protest rallies that spread from Hawija<sup>7</sup> to the Syrian and Jordanian borders. This was combined with irresponsible government actions including repression and torture by the Iraqi military (Al-Ali 2014).

These failures by the government led to a “security gap” for the Sunni population that was filled by the ISIS. The marginalization and exclusion of Iraq’s Sunni population was further compounded by the fact that most Sunni leaders were accused of terrorism and further pushed from political power. So the main problem of this case was the disenfranchisement of the Sunnis, first by the US invasion and occupation and then by the Shia dominated Iraqi government.

This included Tariq al-Hashemi (a Sunni leader and former Vice President under the Saddam regime) and Rafie al-Issawi (a Sunni leader and former Minister of Finance under the Saddam regime), who joined protesters in Al-Anbar. As a result, many Iraqi Sunnis felt that they had 2 choices; either wield arms or support militants who entered their provinces. This partially explains the reason for the presence of ISIS in Sunni areas. These areas became an incubator of extremism and helped to spread the extremist movement. Iraqi military forces were unable to control Sunni areas because they failed to gain the trust of the local populations. The failure of the Iraqi government to control the border between Iraq and Syria also facilitated the entry of many ISIS fighters into Iraq. Therefore, reducing social and political issues like sectarianism in Iraq and Syria is the key to undermining the sustainability of ISIS.

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<sup>7</sup>Hawija: A city in the west of Karkok District.

## **The Role of the US in the Creation of ISIS**

Since the emergence of the ISIS, a debate among the people and the politicians in the Middle East has begun as to whether America was directly or indirectly involved in its foundation. Some academics believe that America created the ISIS in a similar way that it created Al-Qaeda and dozens of other jihadist organizations in Afghanistan to topple the country's Soviet-backed communist government (Balderson 2013). However, some other researchers refute this claim (Rand 2014). The evidence for each side relies on historical facts, but there is a lot of confusion and uncertainty surrounding the issue. The idea that America could be complicit is extremely important in the Middle East and in its efforts to disrupt the ISIS. In my opinion, however, the US invasion of Iraq and subsequent US policy in the region created conditions that favored the formation of the ISIS.

Some academics argue that ISIS is not a Zionist or American creation, but an extremist religious movement. Shakdam (2014, para.36) states: "Considering ISIS' infamous leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi has made several grandiloquent anti-Semitic declarations stating his hatred and resentment of Israel... Islamic radicalism is best understood in its antipathy and opposition toward Israel." "The ISIS members are not mercenaries since mercenaries solely fight for money. ISIS fighters strive to take captives, and believe they will go to paradise when they are killed. Death is perceived as martyrdom, which is evident because so many militants have left jobs, families and universities to fight and die for ISIS and the Caliphate (Stern and Berger 2015). Therefore, these academics insist that extremist religious movement come from religious schools around the world that carry out extensive religious indoctrination (Friedman 2014). And it is this that has resulted in the growth of the Taliban and al-Qaida and many other extremist groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. These scholars further represent that sectarian extremism and hateful propaganda are also responsible for the creation of these insurgent groups (Friedman 2014). This perspective regarding the creation of these groups is largely true, but it is not the whole truth with regards to the ISIS.

Israel intentionally or unintentionally exploits the existence of ISIS to benefit its national security by bombarding the Syrian army and its allies. Doing so supports the group and serves it. It is important to emphasize that the ISIS, especially in Iraq, is not only made up of jihadists who believe in its religious theology but also of other actors who may temporarily share the interests

of the jihadists (Stern and Berger 2015). So when Israel bombards the Syrian army and its allies, it not only helps the ISIS to stay alive but it also keeps the other actors who temporarily share the interests of jihadists. Therefore, the ISIS becomes stronger.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who helped destabilize Iraq by persecuting the Sunni's with help from Iran(Avraham 2017), refused to sign a security agreement with the United States. America had helped to save Shiites from Saddam Hussein during the 1990s Gulf War; then after Nuri al-Maliki helped destabilize Iraq, he practically begged the American government to save Iraq from the ISIS(Al-Ali 2014). However, President Obama refused to support Iraq at that time, and only changed his mind after the ISIS crossed his 'red line'; in other words, when they occupied large areas in Iraq and Syria and committed genocides in these countries. President Obama ordered the US Air Force to strike the ISIS and formed an international alliance to try to save Christians and Yazidis. After ISIS occupied Erbil, President Obama made it a priority to protect American interests and businesses that were being threatened because the ISIS occupied oil rich areas.

This US intervention signified a change in American strategy towards the region. The geo-strategic shifts that the Middle East underwent required the US to begin to depend more on political actors and not exclusively government actors acting at the state level. The idea was to support non-state groups like the "Houthis"<sup>8</sup> or to tolerate organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jabhat Al-Nusra and to employ them to implement American projects in the region(Esposito 2017). This American shift in strategy was based on several factors.

As the role and impact of these non-state actors have grown substantially in recent years, it has highlighted the waning role of the nation-state in the Middle East. There have been chronic structural and systematic crises in Arab nations since the end of colonialism.

After the end of Arab revolutionary movements, there has been a decrease in the effectiveness of governments which has contributed to the rise of non-state actors. The ISIS in Iraq and the Yemeni Houthis began to hold sway over countries beset by instability, despite these countries having robust armies and strong security apparatuses.

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<sup>8</sup>Houthis: Armed political extremist group centralized in the north of Yemen.



There is also a palpable mistrust between the US and political parties in the majority of Arab states that participated in the Arab Spring revolutionary movements because the US abandoned them to protect its interests(Hamid 2015). This rebalance of American strategy has led to a growing trust deficit between local governments/parties and their people. In this context, Milne (2015, para.15) has observed: "In reality, the US and western policy in the conflagration that is now the Middle East is in the classic mold of imperial divide-and-rule." It is remarkable that the US has chosen to back non-state actors instead of not only the governments and Arab regimes but also the traditional militaries. After the invasion of Iraq, terrorist organizations grew spectacularly while the US turned a blind eye to the expansion of their territorial, energy and water resources controls. Also, terrorist organizations grew spectacularly in Syria after the civil revolution started and the US withdrew support from the ruling Assad regime.

In the past few years, the US, British and other western powers have returned to Iraq in order to take on and defeat the ISIS. This was after the ISIS occupied massive swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territory and declared a so-called Islamic Caliphate. The ISIS had moved into the Iraqi city of Ramadi, and the Syrian town of Palmyra. The Iraqi government griped that the US sat staring while the ISIS kept expanding territorially. The Americans, however, insisted they did not want to escalate a brutal war thereby endangering more civilian lives. Secretly, however, as some critics believe, the US authorities did not want to be seen pounding Sunni forces in a sectarian war and risk upsetting their Sunni partners in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf regions (Milne 2015).As Milne (2015, para.9) observed: "A revealing light on how we got here has now been shone by a recently declassified secret US intelligence report, written in August 2012, which uncannily predicts – and effectively welcomes – the prospect of a “Salafist principality” in eastern Syria and an al-Qaida-controlled Islamic state in Syria and Iraq."

In a clear contradiction to Western claims at the time, the Defense Intelligence Agency report distinguished ISIS and fellow Salafists as the "significant powers driving the revolution in Syria." The report went on to state that "western nations, the Gulf states, and Turkey" were supporting the resistance's endeavors to take control of Eastern Syria (Milne 2015), raising the likelihood of setting up a pronounced or undeclared Salafist territory. The Pentagon report(2012, p3) further stated that "this is precisely what the supporting forces to the resistance need, keeping in mind the end goal to disengage the Syrian regime, which is viewed as the vital profundity of

the expansion of Shia (Iraq and Iran)" (report cited in Judicialwatch 2012). The report was not a policy document. It was intensely redacted, and there were ambiguities in the dialect. However, the hints were sufficiently clear. A year into the Syrian revolution, the US with the cooperation of its allies, was not just supporting and arming the rebellions, which it knew to be ruled by extremist factional group; the US was setting up to face the formation of an "Islamic state" in spite of the "grave risk" to Iraq's unity as a Sunni cradle to debilitate Syria.

All that does not mean that the US created ISIS. Obviously, some of its Gulf partners had a role in it as the US Vice President, Joe Biden, recognized in 2014(Milne 2015). In any case, there was no al-Qaida in Iraq until the US and Britain attacked. Also, the US has unquestionably exploited the presence of ISIS against other forces in the area as a feature of a more extensive drive to keep up western control. Then, things changed when ISIS began killing westerners and posting online atrocities, and the Gulf States started backing different extreme groups in the Syrian war (for example, Jabhat al-Nusra).

To sum up, the ISIS emerged in Iraq during the American occupation as a jihadi group to fight the US military occupation and the Shia dominated Iraqi government. This made it attractive to a large number of most Sunni Iraqi youths who were seeking to end the US occupation. It rapidly expanded its influence and membership and became one of the most powerful and largest militia groups in Iraq. ISIS was able to spread and consolidate itself within the Middle East due to three key reasons: the lack of effective secular leadership; dysfunctional and unrepresentative governing institutions; and sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shia Muslims. The US has unquestionably exploited the presence of ISIS against other forces in the area as a feature of a more extensive drive to keep up western control. An effective strategy to combat the ISIS will be the right solution if it includes local actors, countries in the region, and the international community. They should work together, for example, to reduce the financial strength of ISIS and disrupt its military mobility, while targeting its leadership. Local governments must also restrict the ISIS' use of social communication, particularly related to its recruitment.

## **Chapter Two: ISIS Expansion and Power: How has the ISIS Managed to Consolidate its Control in Syria and Iraq and Spread its Influence in the Middle East and Beyond?**

### **Introduction:**

The ISIS has demonstrated in Iraq and Syria that it is the strongest and most dynamic of the myriad of armed groups by seizing large swathes of territory. The group argues that it is implementing Islamic Sharia Law rooted in the 7th century (Friedman 2014). The ISIS is known for its mass killings and carrying out public executions, crucifixions and other violent acts. It uses modern communication tools like social media to promote reactionary politics and religious fundamentalism. It also advocates a return to the pristine Islamic community, as it existed under Prophet Mohammed and his immediate successors.

The ISIS has developed an intricate strategy to generate revenue to fund its operations. According to Tallha and Stansfield (2016, p4), "ISI survived by specializing in mafia-like operations in and around Mosul." It produces oil, collects taxes, steals and sells antiques, extorts money, kidnaps for ransom and imposes levies on farmers. Several political and economic studies (Tallha and Stansfield 2016) have indicated that the ISIS is one of the richest non-state armed groups in the world. Although there is no specific data on the organization's funds or resources, the group relies on a mix of regional and international funds as well as its own resources.

The ISIS is a non-state actor that has several characteristics of a state. It controls large areas and thousands of people who have to accept the group as their legitimate governing authority. Another important feature of the ISIS is how well armed and well equipped it is. During its triumphs in northern Iraq, ISIS seized enormous weapon stashes left by the Iraqi military that were given to the Iraqi government by the United States. A recent report by Amnesty International suggests that the total value of US arms captured by the ISIS is close to \$1 billion (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/05/us-military-admits-failures-to-monitor-over-1-billion-worth-of-arms-transfers/>).

## **Effective Leadership of ISIS:**

The ISIS controls an area the size of Great Britain, and is the only terrorist organization that can occupy such a large area. The ISIS is different than other jihadist organizations, for example, Al-Qaida, in terms of its fighting style. It uses conventional tactics to fight its enemies. Using this method has enabled the group to achieve incredible victories in battles, and it poses a threat to both the region and international community. The ISIS is a non-state actor with several features of a state. It controls huge areas and millions of people who accept ISIS as their authority. Panayiotides (2015, p 14) states, "Like a totalitarian state, the jihadists of the Islamic State keep up an administration over their subjects that forces charges and that meddles in all parts of social life, including instruction."

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed the rise of globalization and economic interdependence under the leadership of the United States (Panayiotides 2015). This includes streams of capital and services, and the migration of individuals with various backgrounds and beliefs. A large number of individuals have migrated from the Middle Eastern countries to Europe and the United States. Fundamentalists dislike globalization, and consider it an American instrument of hegemony in the Middle East. Globalization has energized religious fanatics in the Middle East. The ISIS, as both a quasi-state and non-state actor, is not recognized by other states and does not follow international conventions or rules of war (Panayiotides 2015). Moreover, it is attempting to spread its supranational belief in the Middle East and throughout the world. This lack of respect for international order creates instability in Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, the ISIS not only poses a risk to governments in the Middle East, but also to Western interests throughout the world.

Panayiotides (2015, p 14) argues "More than 6,000 European citizens have moved to the Middle East in order to join the jihadist fight." These citizens are a major risk not only to Middle Eastern countries but also to European countries if they return home and conduct terrorist attacks. Therefore, global security is at a real risk. An international coalition under U.S. leadership to fight the ISIS has been formed. This has resulted in strategic realignment of regional and world powers.

The failure of successive Iraqi governments to deal effectively with the ISIS has created a security gap, mainly for Sunni Iraqis (Panayiotides 2015). This gap has been filled by the ISIS, which has tried to convince the Iraqi Sunnis that only they can maintain security in a Shia-dominated Iraq. The group has tapped into Sunni anger and greatly benefited from former members of the Republican Guard of Saddam Hussain. This disconnect and marginalization of the Iraqi Sunni population was compounded by the fact that several Sunni leaders were accused of terrorism and further removed from political power(Sisk 2011). Therefore, the primary problem was the disenfranchisement of Iraqi Sunnis, first from the US invasion and occupation then from the Shia dominated government.

The ISIS attempted to lobby the residents of Sunni areas, especially former members of the Baath Party of Saddam Hussein. It attempted to make them join the ISIS organization and lead operations against the government and the Shiite population. After its invasion of several cities in Iraq, the ISIS sought to win people over to enhance its capabilities and ensure smooth movement within the areas they controlled. As the ISIS became stronger, they began to terrorize civilians in the areas they ruled. They killed and punished those who did not support them, and killed and detained elders of the cities they controlled (Talha and Stansfield 2016). However, these methods resulted in increased pressure on the group. This pressure increased after the ISIS killed hundreds of Sunnis that belonged to the Hitt clan. However, it was the execution of young men from the Bunmer tribe that brought Sunni tribal forces back to the front line against the ISIS. The practices of ISIS not only included killing, looting and bloodshed, but also the bombing of historic mosques, such as the Prophet Yusuf and Prophet Shet in mosques in Mosul. They vandalized old shrines of imams and scholars, often found buried in areas under their control; they also destroyed churches, temples and other historical monuments belonging to Christians and other religions dating back to the pre-Christmas period (CNN 2016). The crimes committed by ISIS far exceeded the destruction committed by previous invasions of the region.

### **ISIS Revenues:**

The ISIS has generated revenue to fund its operations by producing oil, collecting taxes, stealing and selling antiques, extorting money, kidnapping for ransom, smuggling and imposing levies on farmers (CNN 2016). Several political and economic observers have stated that the ISIS is one of the richest jihadist armed groups in the world. Although there is no specific data on the

organization's funds and resources, it is believed that they have a large amount of funds. Iraqi official sources revealed that in June 2014 the ISIS fighters seized approximately 500 billion Iraqi dinars from the central bank in Mosul (Tallha and Stansfield 2016). Combined with the money they received from other sources, the ISIS was able to manage military operations and provide pensions to thousands of fighters from around the world. When the ISIS first entered Mosul they took weapons from the Iraqi army, which reduced the need to purchase arms and military vehicles. The group has developed regional funding sources as well as taxes and royalties from the sale of oil resources that are within the area under its control.

In March 2014, former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki accused Saudi Arabia of financing the ISIS. The U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jane Basky rejected this accusation and called it "hostile and inaccurate." Some researchers state that there is no available record that indicates the involvement of any government in the establishment or funding of ISIS; however, Gunter Meyer, director of the Arab World Research Center at the German University of Mainz, argues that Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE primarily fund the ISIS. Meyer explains that the reason Gulf states would fund the ISIS is to support the fight against Bashar al-Assad, but also points to an awareness within Saudi Arabia of the dangers that might result when ISIS fighters who are Saudi citizens return home (the possibility they would try to overthrow the Saudi government). Meyer believes that the biggest source of funding for the ISIS is not the Saudi government, but wealthy Saudis.

The ISIS was able to take over important oil fields and facilities in Syria and Iraq during its initial expansion within the region. This enabled the group to control an important source of funding for its activities and operations, as well as purchase weapons (Tallha and Stansfield 2016). The ISIS sold oil illegally to parties in the region and abroad, then transported it across the Turkish border. There were several important political parties in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan that participated in the sale and marketing of ISIS oil (Tallha and Stansfield 2016). In addition, the group earns money from blackmail and royalties. The list of its victims includes businessmen, large companies and members of local governments. Additional funding sources include donations from residents of other countries and money laundering. Several countries from the West and within the region have been implicated, although they publicly deny involvement. In a recent incident, official documents of the U.S. Treasury Department showed that Qatar is a

significant financier of the ISIS. Abduction has also been lucrative for the ISIS, and the group made at least \$20 million in ransom payments in 2014.

The ISIS has a large budget and could be self-reliant in finance now. Financial independence happened as a result of a strategy to diminish reliance on outside donors who could be confronted by government crackdowns on funding transfers. In order to accomplish financial self-sufficiency, ISIS focused on seizing loot from the areas it controls in Syria and Iraq, collecting taxes and smuggling oil. Smuggling oil has been particularly lucrative, and ISIS potentially has the capacity to sustain itself even if there were to be a disruption to this income stream. The U.S. and its allies endeavor to crack down on ISIS smuggling and have been bombarding its oil resources.

### **The Power of ISIS:**

The ISIS is known for its mass killings and for carrying out public executions, crucifixions and other violent acts. It uses modern communication tools like social media to promote reactionary politics and religious fundamentalism. It holds political views that favor a return to the pristine Islamic community founded by Prophet Mohammed and his immediate successors almost 1400 years ago, and argue that this ideology is absent from modern Islamic societies. ISIS fighters have destroyed holy Islamic sites and valuable antiquities despite advocating a return to the early period of Islam. The ISIS controls huge areas in Syria and Iraq that stretch from the Mediterranean coast to the south of Baghdad.

The primary element behind the success of ISIS is its ability to take advantage of Sunni Arab fears and hatred of the Shi'ite leadership in Iraq and Alawite<sup>9</sup> leadership in Syria. In Syria, identity politics have controlled the nation since its foundation after World War I, particularly since the beginning of the Assad family rule in 1970. Sectarian issues have been a dominant factor in Iraqi society since at least 2003. The Middle East has entered into an ideological struggle and it embodies the difference within Iraqis and other countries in the region. Sunni Iraqis came to perceive post-Saddam strategies, such as de-Baathification<sup>10</sup> and the disbanding of

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<sup>9</sup>Alawite: It is a branch of Islam which is considered as followers of Shia who centralize in Syria.

<sup>10</sup>de-Baathification: A policy carried out in Iraq in 2003 by the international coalition with the leadership of U.S.A to remove the Baath party members from the new Iraqi government.

the Iraqi Army, as an attempt to diminish Sunni political power in Iraq and reduce Sunnis to the status of second class citizens (Terrill 2014). Numerous Iraqi Sunnis referred to de-Ba'athification as "de-Sunnization", seeing the issue as a form of revenge and an attempt to banish them from power.

The military and civilian leaders of the U.S. realized that de-Ba'athification was a mistake because of its broad scope, and Iraq's Shi'ite-led government kept grasping for increased power after the American invasion. The U.S. government implemented the de-Ba'athification program, but was not able to end its impact; the justification for the program was frequently used by Shi'ites inside the government as an instrument to control Sunnis (Terrill 2014). In 2008, the Justice and Accountability Law was issued which officially replaced de-Ba'athification, but many think it was an explicit attempt to further subdue Sunnis. Many Shi'ite Iraqis were frustrated and angered by the bombs and suicide assaults coordinated against Shi'ite religious destinations and travelers. This polarized society and created fertile ground for the ISIS.

The ISIS military operations have taken advantage of the experience of officers from the old Iraqi Army, which was disbanded in 2003. Many former army members held grievances against both the United States and the Iraqi government, and al-Qaeda in Iraq encouraged some of them to join the ISIS after they "apologized" for the crimes of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime and declared loyalty (bay'a). The ISIS also has the capacity to move between Syria and Iraq. If the organization is defeated in Iraq, it can regroup in Syria and attack Iraq at a later time, unless it is contained in Syria. Defeating the ISIS in Syria will be more difficult for the U.S. coalition because of the absence of dependable partners on the ground.

Another feature of the ISIS is that it is heavily armed. As a result of its triumph in northern Iraq, the ISIS seized enormous amounts of military equipment given to the Iraqi government by the United States. While there is no accurate inventory available, four infantry battalions and support troops fled Mosul in June 2014, abandoning most of their weapons, equipment and supplies including tanks and an assortment of other military vehicles (Terrill 2014). It is unclear to what extent the ISIS has the capacity to use American tanks; however, it is conceivable that former Iraq army members were capable to keep them in use. In Syria, the ISIS took extensive supplies of weapons and equipment from the Assad government forces, including many old Soviet tanks. The ISIS may have also seized Man Propelled Portable Air Defense systems (MANPADs) from



one of the main Syrian bases that it took over (Terrill 2014). Prior to these seizures, the ISIS used weapons from an earlier Sunni revolt in Iraq, and purchased some with donations from supporters.

In addition, the ISIS had an opportunity to grow and fortify itself during its campaign in Syria. Terrill (2014, p 18) observes in this context: "The Assad regime allowed [the ISIS] to develop its military strength in Syria with a *de facto* truce seemingly in effect in 2013 and into 2014." At that time, Assad focused attacks on the more internationally respected opposition forces in Syria and the Jabhat al-Nusra with the conviction that the West would not permit the ISIS to take control of the country. Terrill (2014, p18) observed, " Assad appeared to hope the West would be forced to acquiesce, or even support, the continuation of his regime." The Syrian regime decided not to focus on attacking the ISIS, while attacking other rebels to seize regions they controlled. This resulted in high casualties on all sides. Militants reacted to this by trying to avoid struggling with the Syrian military, and holding territory over domain previously dominated by other opposition forces. This reality ended in 2014, when the ISIS attacked government forces and attempted to seize military bases controlled by the Syrian regime. By that time, the ISIS had developed considerable military power. In August 2014, the ISIS took over the Tabaqa landing strip in northern Syria in a large battle that was a genuine misfortune for the Assad regime and a military setback. This airbase and the armed force complex was a major area used for various types of ground combat forces.

According to Terrill (2014, p 19), "[ISIS] also has strong recruiting advantages conferred by its spectacular military successes against the Iraqi army and its ability to seize and retain significant territory and declare a caliphate." The ISIS started its lightning offensive in the north of Iraq with an estimated strength of around 3,000 to 5,000 fighters. This number eventually increased to around 30,000 fighters, albeit just about a third were well trained(Terrill 2014). This increase was partly due to the ISIS joining with small extremist groups in the region it dominated, and partly due to the group's financial resources and ability to pay its fighters. The expansion in the group's fighting ability along with military victories on the battlefield and effective use of social media generated massive publicity, which in turn attracted even more fighters to the group.

The ISIS also took advantage of the abuses and mistakes of its enemies, particularly the Iraqi government's merciless discrimination of Sunnis. However, while numerous Sunnis were dismayed by the cruelty of the ISIS, they were also afraid of Shi'ite militias who fought alongside the Iraqi Army. The most crucial of these Shi'ite militias is the Iranian-trained and financed al-Quds Force. Terrill (2014, p 19) has observed that "During the Iraq war of 2003-2011, these militias established a reputation for torturing and killing Sunni Muslims as part of the continuing violence." Various witnesses also stated that Shi'ite volunteers were responsible for various crimes including assaults, rapes and the executions of Sunni Arabs during military operations against the ISIS. A number of Iraqi Sunnis believed that the ISIS was the only way to maintain security and protect themselves against Shi'ite militias. Many Sunni villagers also feared what they saw as an Iranian-supported Iraqi military.

In addition, some intelligence evaluations argued that the ISIS was attracting approximately 1,000 or a more recruits per month (the number of international arrivals has come down in recent years). Some political investigators have noted that the ISIS "old guard", which included officials from military and intelligence agencies of the former Saddam regime, set up training programs to ensure new fighters and leaders were well-versed in military techniques and strategies(ValueWalk 2015).Therefore, the international coalition should be quite aware that restraining the growth of ISIS may not come through air strikes alone, and putting boots on the ground must be seriously considered (ValueWalk 2015).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, this thesis tried to answer two major questions. First, what are the primary factors behind the creation of the ISIS? Second, how did the ISIS manage to consolidate its control in Syria and Iraq and spread its influence in the Middle East and beyond? It was clear through the research that the ISIS emerged in Iraq during the American occupation as a jihadi group to fight the US military occupation and the Shia dominated Iraqi government. This made it attractive to a large number of mostly Sunni Iraqi youths who were seeking to end the US occupation. It rapidly expanded its influence and membership and became one of the most powerful and largest militia groups in Iraq. The ISIS was able to spread and consolidate itself within the Middle East due to three key reasons: the lack of effective secular leadership; dysfunctional and unrepresentative governing institutions; and sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shia

Muslims. The US has unquestionably exploited the presence of ISIS against other forces in the area as a feature of a more extensive drive to keep up western control. The international community should work to reduce the financial strength of ISIS and disrupt its military mobility, while targeting its leadership. Local governments must also restrict the ISIS' use of social communication, particularly related to its recruitment.

The ISIS has caused strategic realignment of regional actors and global powers. The failure of successive governments in Iraq led to a security gap characterized by a lack of collective security and the inability to maintain peace in Sunni areas. The ISIS initially demonstrated that it could maintain security for Sunni people, tap into Sunni anger and benefit from the support of former soldiers of the Saddam Hussain regime. The main reason for the success of the ISIS was its ability to take advantage of Sunni Arab fears and hatred of the Shi'ite leadership in Iraq and Alawite leadership in Syria. In Syria, identity politics have controlled the nation since its foundation after World War I, and particularly since the beginning of Assad family rule in 1970. Sectarian issues have been a dominant factor in Iraqi society since 2003. The Middle East has entered into an ideological struggle (Sunnis and Shiites), which has highlighted the differences within Iraqi society and other countries in the region. Moreover, differences between sects will continue to expand and become firmly rooted due to the integration of religion and public policy. This is the most serious dilemma facing the people of the Middle East, and the primary reason for the lack of progress in the region.

Several political and economic researchers have argued that the ISIS is the richest jihadist group in the world. The group has a large budget and may be able to sustain itself without outside financial support. The ISIS has generated revenue to fund its operations by producing and selling oil, collecting taxes, stealing and selling antiques, extorting money, kidnapping for ransom, smuggling and imposing levies on farmers. This financial independence is the consequence of an ongoing strategy to reduce the group's reliance on outside donors. Consequently, the ISIS has rapidly become stronger and the further expansion of the group will lead to more brutal conflicts in the Middle East, which may result in the redrawing of the political boundaries of the region.

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