# Rise of ISIS and Security Implications for Middle East

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### Introduction

ISIS' juggernaut continues to gobble up more land in Syria and Iraq, expanding its 'caliphate' in territories it conquers. The besieged town of Kobani, a Syrian border town in close proximity to Turkey, is in the midst of a savage battle between ISIS and Kurds, the latter buttressed by American airpower and weapons. Routing its rivals the official al-Qaida affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, ISIS took control of oil-rich province of Deir Ezzor in Syria, the oilfields from which gush out millions of barrels of oil, and the revenues collected from sale of oil from these oilfields bankroll its battles. Taking advantage of chaos and anarchy, Kurds in northern Iraq expanded their influence to Kirkuk. They already had autonomous regional status in Erbil, their capital, Halabja and Sulamaniya in northern Iraq. As the brutalities of ISIS in executing journalists and massacring people on sectarian basis gained notoriety, the governments in Syria and Iraq too accumulated infamy by dropping barrel-bombs indiscriminately on towns and cities under ISIS' control. The resultant exodus of civilians in Syria has reached over 7 million, one of the largest refugee movements in recent history.

At the regional level, this war has soured Turkey's relations with Iraq, Iran and Syria. The last three believe Turkey, along with Saudi Arabia and Qatar to be the paymasters of the groups fighting in Iraq and Syria. This has led to sharpening of fault lines on religious and sectarian divide. Add to this Iran's F-4 phantom fighters pounding ISIS positions in Iraq and America's firefight in Syria. Hezbollah too has sent thousands of its guerillas to fight alongside Assad's forces to halt the further advance of ISIS. This situation is messy at its worst.

Keeping in consideration the fluid situation in Middle East and its complexity, one needs to be cautious in making predictions. This article gives a brief historical sketch that contextualizes the issue and its complexity, explains ISIS' emergence and the key determinants that gave rise to it. Last part of the article gives an

assessment of the security implications of this war in the region. Security in the article is used both in conventional as well as non-conventional paradigms.

**Back to the Past: Historical Evolution of the Demarcation of Middle East Boundaries**

Decades ago the inhabitants of a few Lebanese villages woke up one morning and found themselves to be part of Palestine. After the First World War, Lebanon and Syria became French protectorates (Syria was a part of Lebanon until it was chopped off to carve a new state) while the British controlled Palestine. French handed over few Lebanese villages in Galilee to Britain under an agreement between the two states. So Lebanese living in these villages found themselves to have become Palestinians overnight. Israel, during the 1948 war with Arabs, what the latter call 'Nakba,' conquered the area and initiated an orgy of ethnic cleansing, killing some and making others to flee back to Lebanon. Though originally Lebanese they then became refugees in Lebanon[1].

This historical vignette is indicative of the complexity of Middle East and its tangled security dynamics

**Sykes-Picot Pact, Balfour Declaration and Ba'athism**

When the 'Sick man of Europe' as Ottoman Empire was then called, entered the First World War against the Allies, it was waging its last war as an Empire. After the defeat of Axis powers, the Ottoman Empire fragmented and multiple nation-states were created with artificial nations and arbitrary boundaries[2]. It seemed the demarcation of the boundaries in Middle East, as a result of the Sykes-Picot Pact between France and Britain in the aftermath of the First World War, was supposedly done keeping in consideration the 'needs' of the minorities[3]. King Feisal, a Sunni, was hoisted on a predominantly Shia Iraq. France, which had Syria and Lebanon as its protectorate, first separated Lebanon (a part of Syria) from Syria and founded a sectarian state with Christian Maronites jostling for power with Shia and Sunni Muslims, which culminated in a macabre civil war in 1975, lasting for 15 long years[4].

The League of Nations incorporated the Balfour Declaration in Britain's Palestine Mandate on 22 July, 1922. Balfour Declaration was British foreign secretary's letter

to Baron Rothschild, a British Jewish community leader, on 2 November, 1917, promising British support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine[5]. The culmination of the Balfour Declaration was the creation of Israel in 1948 and the Palestinian 'Nakba' and their elusive search for a state on the remnants of historic Palestine, a dream that continues to elude them.

A string of revolutions in Egypt, Iraq and Syria in 1950s did bring about certain half-hearted and fleeting alterations in the boundaries of Middle East, but they soon crumbled and Middle East reverted to its former boundaries. Syria under Michael Aflaq, one of the founders of Ba'athism, and Egypt under Nasser, one of the leaders of Free Officers that took power in Egypt through a coup d'état, made United Arab Republic in order to unite their countries. But the resistance in Syria against playing second fiddle to Egypt, supplemented by the bloated egos of the respective leaders of the two states, became the cause of undoing of this transient alliance. Meanwhile, not to be left behind Iraq and Jordan too made a confederation as a counterforce to UAR, only to crumble with the collapse of UAR.

The historical background in outline is aimed at, contextualizing the historical evolution of the Middle East as a region. Notwithstanding the brutal Lebanese civil war, the Arab-Israeli wars, the First Gulf war and Iran-Iraq war, all were in their own ways brutal and savage. However, the tumultuous situation in Middle East presently is taking a hideous shape which could possibly supersede the preceding wars in their brutality and may leave deep impact on stability in Middle East. The rise of ISIS and plethora of other militant groups, not to mention al-Qaida, in this region, could further exacerbate the religious-sectarian fault lines if the current development continue apace and remedial measures are not taken.

**Emergence of ISIS**

ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) now simply called IS, was preceded by al-Qaida in Iraq, which immediately spread its tentacles in that country after the American invasion. Al-Qaida then mutated into Islamic State in Iraq, finally transforming into Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/Levant. Now just calling itself IS (Islamic State), it declared a 'Caliphate' on 29 June, 2014.

This section, will identify main determinants that gave birth to Da'esh, ISIS' Arabic acronym. It will broadly focus on three main determinants that provided germane

ground for the emergence of IS; American invasion of Iraq, post-war Iraq and Syrian civil war.

**Operation Iraqi Freedom and Post-War Iraq: The Seeds of Chaos, and of Night**

American invasion of Iraq was based on two assumptions: Iraq's alleged acquiring of uranium in Niger to use it for the production and manufacture of nuclear weapons and its alleged links with al-Qaida[6]. Both of them turned out to be flagrant forgeries spewed to justify the war[*]. Though, the invaders did not discover nuclear weapons, their action created conditions for al-Qaida to expand its influence in Iraq.

Like any other people under occupation, Iraqis too resisted the invasion of their country by an outside force. Both Shias and Sunnis fought against American forces. Shia militias under Muqtada al-Sadr battled American forces in Najaf[7]. Soon other small militant groups also sprouted, mainly in Sunni areas, which would work under the umbrella of al-Qaida. Each had its own rationale to take up arms against American forces. Some felt disempowered and disenfranchised after the overthrow of their patron, others turned their guns against beneficiaries of this invasion, while others considered it a religious duty to fight an invading force on Muslim lands. One of these groups was JeishAhl al-Sunnah al-Jamaah, which had taken root among Sunni communities.[8] It was founded by Abu bakr al-Baghdadi in 2004. He was captured by American forces in Fallujah a few months later, after he had founded his own militia.[9]

Al-Qaida brought under its fold multiple Sunni militias, most importantly al-Tawhidwa al-Jihad group founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who would go on to become the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq. Their merger in 2004 gave birth to the latter.[10] The Sheikh of Slaughter, as Abu Musab was nicknamed, was tracked down by America and killed in 2006.[11] He was succeeded by Omar Zarqawi, but the organization had considerably weakened and was now on the back foot. It had been uprooted from Anbar as a result of tribal revolt and its overall presence in Iraq gradually shrank.[12]

Baghdadi, who was born as Ibrahim ibn Awwad al-Badri al-Samarrai in 1971, in the Iraqi city of Samarra, along with some of the militant leaders he had met in prisons of Bucca and Abu Gharaib, revitalized the insurgency which had considerably

weakened after 2006. They were helped by reluctant supporters in the shape of Baathist who had suffered the most as a result of the postwar political configurations and power structures in Baghdad.

One of the first acts of American forces after the invasion of Iraq, was to establish Iraqi Governing Council (IGP), in July, 2003. Its actual control however, rested with Coalition Provisional Authority, headed first by Jay Garner, then by Paul Bremer in the following years.[13] Iraqi army was dissolved, entire state institutions subverted, and a new political structure was fashioned based essentially on sectarianism, a process, what Ramzy Baround calls, 'political swindle.' The composition of the IGP was an amalgamation of 'pro-US Iraqi individuals with sinister sectarian pasts.'

The resentment and frustration of the disempowered and disenfranchised officials, Sunni tribal leaders and Baathists who had enjoyed state privileges under their patron, led them to give their support to militias and militant groups that had sprouted in Iraq to resist American forces. The arrogance and callous approach of Maliki administration, which came into power as a result of political deal, did not help the situation either, it rather contributed to its further deterioration. When Sunni peaceful protestors had held a sit-in protest in Hawijah, a town in the southwest of Kirkuk, rather than ameliorating their grievances, Iraqi military forces supported by tanks brutally crushed it, killing almost 50 people including eight children, further shrinking the space for amicably resolving the issues.  So a concatenation of events contributed to the rise of ISIS. But how did it become so strong a force that its influence and physical presence now straddles across borders?

**Syrian Uprising and Civil War**

What had started as a civil rights movement for political reforms, by political and civil society dissidents in Syria in 2011, soon transformed into a lethal and violent civil war. Inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Syrians too waged their peaceful resistance for greater political reforms. Assad regime responded with brute force, drawing the protestors away from non-violent means of protest to more lethal means to affect political change[14].

The Syrian army defectors with other indigenous forces formed the Free Syrian Army, the so-called 'vaunted bulwark of moderate opposition, supported and

financed by West and Gulf States. But as civil war perpetuated, creating chaos and lawlessness, other groups entered the fray. Among others, Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) led by Baghdadi sent a member of its group, Abu Mohammad al-Joulani to Syria. After the initial successes, ISI formally announced the existence of Jabhat –al-Nusra and changed its name from ISI to ISIS.[15]Rifts soon erupted between ISIS and Nusra Front, the latter choosing to affiliate with al-Qaida. Plethora of other militant groups sprouted in Syria like Ahrar al-Sham, and Islamic Front funded largely by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The so-called neat division between 'moderate' and 'radical fanatics' is not as neat as it is made out to be. Irrespective of the coordination between rebel groups for pragmatic reasons, several fighters have defected to other militant groups. Fighters of FSA (Free Syrian Army) fled from it and joined Nusra. Nusra forces have defected to ISIS when the latter affiliated itself to al-Qaida, bringing with them weapons and buttressing the firepower and numbers of ISIS.[16] Karen Koning Abuzayd, a member of the UN's Commission of Inquiry, says,"more and more Syrian rebels are defecting to ISIS".[17] It is worth remembering that al-Nusra was the fiercest fighting force in Syrian so-called moderate opposition group.

The role of external powers, most importantly certain Gulf States and Turkey under 'American tutelage' officially and unofficially financing these militant groups in Syria, is an open secret. NATO had previously allied itself with Islamic Fighting Group, an al-Qaida affiliate, in Libya in their drive to oust Gaddafi.[18] Turkey's nearly 500-mile border provided the rebels with a 'rare support' base to bring in both jihadists and weapons.[19] Military supplies from Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been channelized through Turkey for rebel acquisition.[20] And most of these weapons have gone to hard-line Islamic jihadists.[21]  In addition to the external sources of their funding and weapons, the militant groups' power has been supplemented by their control of huge gas and oil resources of Deir Ezzor, Allepo and Hasaka in Syria, most of which are controlled by IS. The latter's invasion of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, has also been a substantial source of funding. Couple it with the taxes and extortion money it gets, then you will have one of the richest militias in the world bestriding borders.

The foregoing discussion shows that ISIS did not pop out of vacuum and expanded due to a single factor.

**Security Implications for Middle East**

Patrice Cockburn, writing for Independent newspaper, aptly summed up the complexity of the situation in Middle East

Distinct conflicts have tangled together in Syria; a popular uprising against dictatorship which is also a sectarian battle Sunni and Alawite sect; a regional struggle between Shias and Sunnis, which is also a decades-old conflict between an Iranian-led group and Iran's traditional enemies, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar. At another level there is a reborn Cold War confrontation: Russia and China versus America.

This is supplemented by an absurd contradiction- monarchies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia bankrolling opposition movements to purportedly bring about democratic reforms.

Though the veracity of the notion, that religious sectarianism is relatively more defined and pronounced in contemporary Middle East than ever before, should be seriously qualified, given the fact that the Kurds are fighting IS both in Iraq and Syria and some Syrian government regiments and battalions, predominantly belonging to the Sunni sect, battle to block the forward movement of IS, but it would be too simplistic an approach to overlook the burgeoning religious schisms in this conflict.

Iran had watched its influence expand in the aftermath of American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; which, though, did not sit well with Gulf monarchies-despite their traditional rivalries with Saddam, they helped Iraq both financially and diplomatically during the 'Whirlwind War,' as Khomeini called the Iran-Iraq war from 1980-88. They capitalized and cashed on the resentment of the Sunnis in the post-war Iraq and armed the defectors and opposition groups in Syria in cahoots with USA to further diminish Iranian influence. Richard Dearlove, former head of MI6, says it is unlikely that Sunni community as a whole lined up behind IS without the direct or indirect Saudi support. Replace Iraq with Syria and add a few more Gulf countries under American tutelage, it might help understand the Syria situation. Turkey has been the conduit through which foreign fighters have entered Syria and Gulf monarchies and have channelized funding for these groups. The 500-mile Turkish border with Syria has been instrumental for passage of both militants and arms and equipment bound for them. Iran, to protect its traditional allies, has

resorted to airpower, using its Phantom-4 fighters to pound IS hideouts in North-east of Iraq;[22] besides, it has sent Quds Force of Islamic Revolutionary Guards to buttress Iraqi armed forces. Hezbollah guerrillas have been fighting alongside the Syrian forces since the genesis of the civil war. Syria is the single conduit that channelizes Iranian funds and arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The current situation in Middle East has exacerbated the religious sectarian fault lines. How these developments and the resultant sufferings of the people are going to shape Middle East is a moot point. Is it the beginning of the end of Sykes-Picot pact? But what one could most cautiously predict is that: the growing religious schisms coupled with the continuous pouring in of weapons and monies are setting an environment for a protracted war, increasing human sufferings, making more people flee and creating macabre instability that could wreak greater havoc in the region. And some even think that American airstrikes, though helpful in short-term in terms of helping to halt the forward movement of IS and giving airpower cover to forces and militias confronting IS, are likely to make the situation worse by increasing sectarianism.

**Lest We Forget**

Calling war a collective failure of the human spirit would not be far off the mark. The sheer savagery it entails is both numbing and horrifying. The civil wars in Syria and Iraq have been no different. The brutalities of ISIS and other militant groups have been matched by the harsh actions of the government forces. The suicide bombings and decapitations by the former have been reciprocated by barrel-bombs of the latter. Each according to its ability-in this case brutality is just moderated by limited potential and want of resources. All this has resulted in horrifying deaths. UN, in its report of June 2014, estimated that close to 6000 civilians have lost their lives from Jan to June 2014 in Iraq. Whereas, in Syria the catastrophe has been much greater. Outgoing United Nations human rights chief, Navi Pillay, gave a toll of 191,369 deaths recorded between March 2011 when war erupted, and April 2014. She added, it might be an underestimate excluding the death of 50,000 other people which could not be verified. Colville, Pillay's spokesperson, said 5000 and 6000 thousands are dying every month in Syria.

13.6 million People have been forced to leave their homeland due to the civil wars in Syria and Iraq. 7.2 million, have been internally displaced within Syria, while 3.3

million Syrians have found refuge in neighboring countries, some cared and supported by international humanitarian organizations, others helped by regional countries and some others marooned and stranded to fend for themselves. And these are not just numbers, but sentient mortals who feel the pangs of hunger, pain and strive to maintain their self-respect.

## Conclusion

What started as Sunni revolt against post-war power structure in Iraq soon transmogrified into the behemoth of IS, within a decade. IS (Islamic State) now controls areas that surpass the landmass of UK and other Europeans states and its fighting cadres hail from a multitude of states and nationalities. Jürgen Todenhöfer, renowned German journalist who recently became the first western journalist to interview IS says, IS is far stronger than what we think. But did not al-Qaida emerge as a small organization and later expanded its idea, if not its organization, across countries, cashing, exploiting and championing Muslim causes? It needs no profound historical sense to understand who provided al-Qaida its breeding ground. Imperial pretensions garbed in benevolent and humanistic cloak have resulted in all but their stated purposes. Couple them with the myopic 'vision' of indigenous rulers who do not see beyond their institutional interests and personal gains.

Insurgencies or for that matter terrorism can only be eradicated either by army's bayonet or conceding to the terrorists. The latter is not an option, more so given their savagery and ideology, though neither can one win by relying on sheer force. But what one could take as the first step is to erode their moral standing by dissuading the people who draw to such organizations for reasons that are more social, political and economic than religious. The recent resignation of Maliki and his replacement by Haider al-Abadi could possibly be a step towards the right direction if he succeeds to build up a government that is inclusive and non-sectarian. Only time will tell what is in store for Middle East.

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## ENDNOTES

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[2] Robert Fisk, *The Great for Civilization: The Conquest of Middle East*(London, HarperCollins, 2004), p, 376.

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[6] Adel Safty, "Iraq: Manipulating the Evidence to Start a War," *Global research,* February 14, 2006. http://www.globalresearch.ca/iraq-manipulating-the-evidence-to-start-a-war/1976

[*] Joseph Wilson, American Ambassador went to Niger to check the claims, where he found nothing of worth to substantiate the allegations of the Bush administration. His findings were later substantiated by Jacques Baute of International Atomic Agency's Iraq Inspection Unit. Whereas, the allegation about the alleged meeting between Mohammad Ata, one of the hijackers of 9/11, and an Iraqi intelligence affair turned out to be not different from the other allegation and want of veracity. A joint investigation by Prague and Washington concluded that Mohammad Ata was in USA at the time of the alleged meeting.

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[12] See Martin Chulov, *op.cit.*

[13] See RamzyBaroud, *op.cit*.

[14]BasmaAttasi and CajsaWikstrom, "Uprising, Revolution or Civil War?" *Al-Jazeera*, February 15, 2013. http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/03/2013313145616102879.html

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