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The Rapid Rise of the Islamic State in Syria:
When State Weakness, Identity Politics and Regional
Vacuum of Power Collide

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The Rapid Rise of the Islamic State in Syria: When State Weakness, Identity Politics, and Regional Vacuum of power Collide

Rana Antoine Assaker

ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the factors that have led to the rapid rise of the Islamic State in Syria. Employing a case study methodology, it argues that the emergence and consolidation of the Islamic State in Syria are to be attributed to the following factors: state fragmentation, identity politics, and shifts in the regional balance of power coupled with a power vacuum in the Middle East. By 2014, these three factors that cut across the regional-domestic nexus have converged, facilitating the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria.

Against this background, the thesis explores the dynamics of sectarian polarization between 2004 and 2014 in Syria, and the extent to which regional dynamics have shaped such dynamics. More specifically, it shows how broader rivalries coupled with the Syrian state's politics of divide and rule have throughout the years exacerbated intra-Syrian divisions and contributed to their 'sectarianization'. The events of the Arab Spring in 2011 have however constituted the main spark that led to the outbreak of sectarian violence in Syria pitting various factions against each other and accelerating the collapse of state legitimacy primarily in eastern Sunni-dominated areas. In this context, the Islamic State has established itself in areas that have suffered from the disengagement of the state and that have been subjected to societal and economic marginalization. The thesis further demonstrates how inter-state rivalries and weak regional structures in the Middle East have led to a state of regional unbalances.

The lack of regional consensus over the prioritization of the Islamic State as a primary threat and the failing role of the Arab League in the uprisings have contributed to deepening the power vacuum that the Islamic State has conveniently and rapidly filled in Syria, presenting itself as a powerful non-state actor against a failing state and a dysfunctional regional order.

Keywords: ISIS, Syria, State Weakness, Regional Balances of Power, Power Vacuum, Identity Politics, Syrian Conflict, Arab Spring

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Research Objectives and Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore and investigate the rise of the Islamic State as a non-state actor in Syria, with specific emphasis on the contextual local and regional factors that may have led or contributed to this phenomenon. The central claim of this research is that the Islamic State in Syria is a phenomenon that emerged as a result of structural and power shifts on the domestic and regional level, rather than the result of an Islamic awakening or revival, and that the religious dimension of the Islamic State is in fact an extension of the identity politics upon which these local and regional shifts and conflicts were taking place. More specifically, this study is aimed at examining intersecting local and regional factors that have contributed to the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria. I therefore attempt to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent did state weakness or failure contribute to this phenomenon?
- To what extent did identity politics contribute to the rise of the Islamic State in Syria?
- To what extent did the unstable regional order in the Middle East, the shift in the balance of power, and the emergence of a power vacuum contribute to the rise of the Islamic State in Syria?

To address these research objectives and questions, I employ a case study approach to explain the emergence and rise of the Islamic State in Syria, with the basic assumption that the emergence of this phenomenon was the result of the perfect intersection of enabling

local and regional factors. The local factors include the gradual and eventually accelerated weakening of the Syrian state as a result of the failed reforms of Bashar Assad after 2000;¹ the collapse of many vital state functions and services as a result of corruption and the persistent severe drought between 2006 and 2010;² and the growing intensity of identity politics along sectarian lines inside Syria, some of which was attributed to the failed internal regime politics and much of which was attributed to the regional strife along sectarian identity lines. The regional factors include the unstable regional Arab order as a result of the collapse of the balance of power between regional powers –the Shiite Iran and the Sunni Arab World– following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the 2011 Arab Spring, and the failing role of the League of Arab States (LAS) in Syria; and finally, the emergence of a power vacuum in Syria, extending to Iraq, that resulted from the weak position of the Syrian state in the middle of a regional power struggle along ethnic and sectarian rift lines in the Middle East.

1.2 Background

The Islamic State (IS), also known as the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS), or the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL), is a non-state actor that emerged between 2011 and 2013, and in June 2014 claimed statehood in the region extending from western Iraq to the eastern territories of Syria. The statehood was declared under the guise of the Islamic caliphate with the Iraqi city of Mosul as its capital in Iraq and Raqqa as its capital in Syria.³

¹ A. Sarihan. (2012). “Is the Arab Spring in the third wave of democratization? The case of Syria and Egypt.” *Turkish Journal of Politics*, v.3, no.1, pp.67-68.

² T. Friedman. (Jan 22, 2014). “Wikileaks, drought and Syria: Commentary.” *New York Times*, p.A21.

³ N. Panayiotides. (Sep 2015). “The Islamic State and the redistribution of power in the Middle East.” *International Journal on World Peace*, v.32, no.3, pp. 11-12.

The Islamic State traces its origins to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 when al-Qaeda succeeded in mobilizing and recruiting many former Sunni Iraqi army officers as well as the disenfranchised Sunni tribesmen in western Iraq. Under the leadership of Musab al-Zarqawi, and with support from Assad's regime whose intention was to undermine the American presence in Iraq, the organization associated with al-Qaeda enjoyed free passage between Syria and Iraq through a "jihadist corridor" which also enabled al-Qaeda to enjoy sympathy and support from Arab Sunni tribes in Syria.⁴ The organization was crushed in 2007 when the US won over the Arab Sunni tribes in Iraq and led a campaign against al-Qaeda. By 2011, however, the Iraqi government had turned on its promises to the Sunni tribes, and with the American withdrawal from Iraq, the jihadist movement was revived under the command of Abu Bakr al- Baghdadi.⁵

Between 2011 and 2013, al-Baghdadi worked alongside with al-Qaeda in Syria as part of the rebellion against Assad's regime. Al-Baghdadi, however, was interested in establishing an Islamic caliphate rather than toppling Assad's regime, which resulted in a conflict between ISIS and al-Qaeda. By 2014, however, the continuous failure of the Iraqi government to respond to the Sunni uprisings in western Iraq provided ISIS an opportunity to organize itself and to capitalize on the strong support it enjoyed from the Arab Sunni tribes in Iraq, leading to a wide-scale military invasion of Mosul and other Sunni areas in Iraq in May 2014.⁶

⁴ S. Ahmari. (Feb 12, 2016). "The rise of Islamic State." *The Wall Street Journal*, p.A9.

⁵ C. Visoianu. (2014). "The rise of ISIS: The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant." *International Scientific Conference*, v.1, pp. 166-167.

⁶ S. Zunes. (Jan 14, 2016). "US bears blame for rise of Islamic State." *National Catholic Reporter*, v.52, no.6, p. 20.

Hence, it was with great awe and shock that the world watched, as the militants of ISIS swept through the Iraqi city of Mosul, eventually declaring the Islamic caliphate and state, claiming a territory bigger than that of the United Kingdom, and extending from northern Iraq all the way through northern Syria⁷. Since then, thousands of air attacks have been launched by a US-led coalition against ISIS, and more recently, by Russia, in an attempt to destroy and defeat ISIS both in Iraq and in Syria. So far, however, these military efforts have been met with little or no success, especially as ISIS continues to maintain its strong hold over most cities, towns and territories that it has held since June 2014⁸.

The emergence of ISIS in Iraq may be to a great extent understandable, especially in light of the drastic and tragic events that have haunted that country since Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Since then, the Iraqi army and state had both been subjected to unprecedented pressure, siege, and devastation, culminating in the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the toppling of Saddam Hussein, the dismemberment of the former state, and the attempt to create a completely new state.⁹ Regardless of the extent to which the efforts to build a new state were successful or not, the rise of militant Sunni groups in Iraq was not surprising, and the fact that al-Qaeda found in the disgruntled Sunni community there a fertile ground for establishing base for its military operations against the US was to a great extent understandable.¹⁰ On top of this, Iraq has been to a great extent

⁷ F. Haddad. (Aug 4, 2014). "A sectarian awakening: Reinventing Sunni identity in Iraq after 2003." *Hudson Institute*.

⁸ J. Malsin. (Nov 30, 2015). "Russian airstrikes in Syria seem to be hurting civilians more than ISIS." *Time*.

⁹ Haddad. (Aug 4, 2014).

¹⁰ H. Al-Qarawee. (Apr 23, 2014). "Iraq's sectarian crisis: A legacy of exclusion." *Carnegie Middle East Center*.

in a state of civil war or strife since 2006, not to mention severe political, ethnic and sectarian conflicts that continue to weaken the state vis-à-vis non-state actors.¹¹

Syria, on the other hand, was a completely different story. To start with, Syria had been for at least four decades boasted one of the most powerful and stable states in the Levant, both under the authoritarian rule of the Assad family, assisted by the power and loyalty of the Baath Party and the army.¹² Although Syria was not among the richer states in the region, it nonetheless boasted a stable economy, and a reliable welfare state that offered high quality public services including healthcare, education and the management of resources within a socialist framework where the state controlled and protected all the vital functions of the economy.¹³ This is not to mention that Syria had in recent history maintained a powerful political and legitimacy, both at home and with respect to its political position in the region, partly for being frontline state directly confronting Israel, and partly for its ability to forge alliances with other regional players.¹⁴

Hence, when the events of the Arab Spring first started in Tunisia and then in Egypt and Libya, almost no attention was paid to the few demonstrations that broke out in some Syrian cities such as Deraa, demanding reforms. Those demonstrations started in February 2011, more than a month after the Arab Spring claimed the Tunisian regime and eventually the Egyptian regime.¹⁵ In response to this, analysts close to the Syrian regime insisted that Syria was different, and that what applied to other Arab secular republican regimes did not

¹¹ Al-Qarawee (Apr 23, 2014).

¹² L. Mirachian. (2005). *Syria and its Neighborhood*. Milano: I.S.U. Universita Cattolica, p.12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.13.

¹⁵ C. Phillips. (2011). "Syria's bloody Arab Spring." *London School of Economics, IDEAS*, pp, 37-38.

apply to Syria.¹⁶ As demonstrations intensified, the Syrian regime remained defiant. Even the Arab and international media showed very little interest in the growing number and size of demonstrations in Syria.¹⁷

Yet, less than two years later, and by the end of 2013, the Islamic State was already expanding rapidly in northern Syria, especially as it imposed its full control over the northern city of Raqqa where it established its headquarters.¹⁸ Once al-Baghdadi declared the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria from Mosul, the Syrian wing of ISIS immediately declared its loyalty to the caliphate and a de facto extension of it, although in many ways remaining autonomous with its activities and operations confined within Syria.¹⁹

The rapid manner in which ISIS was able to establish and impose its rule both in Syria is unprecedented. The relevant developments were so rapid that many analysts and observers were taken by surprise.²⁰ Even today, numerous theories, many of which qualify as conspiracy theories, are proposed to explain the unprecedented speed at which a non-state actor was able to control so much territory and to establish itself as a quasi-state or arguably as a state. Such theories, for example, have suggested that ISIS was an American, Israeli, Saudi, Qatari or Turkish creation. Others have attributed the formation and rise of ISIS to the ongoing sectarian conflict in the Middle East along Shiite-Sunni lines and as a product of the geopolitical lines of rift between Shiite Iran and the Sunni Arab world.

Unanswered Questions about the Islamic State in Syria

¹⁶ Ibid., p.37.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.38.

¹⁸ D. Remnick. (Nov 22, 2015). "Telling the truth about ISIS and Raqqa." *The New Yorker*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Irrespective of the claims and conspiracy theories, however, many serious questions remain unanswered as to how ISIS had managed to rise and establish itself so rapidly and so efficiently and effectively, especially in Syria, a country with a regime that had for decades been characterized as a powerful state, manifesting a cohesive authoritarian rule, and consistency in maintaining its grip over its territory, resources and population. While the rise of ISIS in Iraq may not have been so surprising in light of the recent turmoil prevailing in that country during the two past decades, the rise of ISIS in Syria was surprising and shocking for three reasons: first, it happened so rapidly and within a very short timeframe²¹; secondly, it happened in Syria whose state was widely known for both security and military grip over power²²; thirdly, it was not preceded by any warning signs or indicators which would have even remotely suggested the possibility of the rise of such an entity in Syria²³. This is particularly in contrast with the situation in Iraq where ISIS was created within a very fragile state, in a country struggling with civil wars and ethnic-sectarian strife, amidst the absence of a central authority or the presence of a reliable security and military, and over a long period of time.

1.3 Justification of Research

The rapid rise of ISIS has attracted the attention of numerous researchers and analysts, not only as a result of the turmoil and disturbance that ISIS has afflicted on the map of regional politics in the troubled region of the Middle East, but also because of the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

numerous challenging questions that this development raises for political scientists as well as international relations scholars.

First of all, the rise of non-state actors and their ability to control territories and populations, to exercise some form of political power and challenge the sovereignty of a state or a number of states at the same time, is not new or surprising. Throughout recent history, several non-state actors have been able to manifest such characteristics and to challenge the authority and sovereignty of host states. Moreover the Islamic State in Syria managed to rise, claim territory, challenge the state, and impose its political will within a matter of months only. All these characteristics make the rise of the Islamic State in Syria unprecedented, qualifying it as a very interesting subject of research, especially as it challenges many of the previous assumptions about the environment in which non-state actors rise and thrive, particularly state weakness and failure.

Secondly, it is worth noting that the rise of the Islamic State in Syria suddenly took place within two years of the outbreak of social unrest and the so-called revolt of the Syrian people which is placed within the events of the Arab Spring that afflicted several Arab countries in the Middle East. This raises two major theoretical and practical questions.

The first question is the extent to which the rise of the Islamic State in Syria is linked to regional developments, specifically those related to the Arab Spring, the collapse of several Arab regimes that in many ways seem to resemble the Syrian regime in their structure, control mechanisms and nature. In other words, the question is whether the rise of the Islamic State in Syria is the result and outcome of regional factors and regional dynamics in this specific period or not.

The second question is the extent to which the rise of the Islamic State is linked to regional power conflicts and the shifts or changes in the balance of power in the Middle East that followed the collapse of the Iraqi regime and the subsequent imbalance in the region, the diminishing role and presence of the League of Arab States, the collapse of the traditional Arab order, and the emergence of a new Middle East that is still witnessing an ongoing rivalry between multiple powers over regional leadership, specifically Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. Such a question cannot be avoided when taking into consideration several factors: the fact that the Islamic State in Syria has successfully recruited thousands of foreign and international fighters and members from all over the world; the fact that the Islamic State in Syria has imposed its territorial presence in the middle of a very complex political map and at the borders of several regional players, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey; and the fact that the Islamic State has been the target of direct military attacks from several international powers including the US, NATO, and more recently Russia.²⁴ Hence, more specifically, the question is whether indeed the Islamic State in Syria is a direct or indirect outcome of changes in regional structures, dynamics and conflicts, as well as a serious shift in the regional balance of power that resulted from a radical change in radical changes in the power, influence and activities of regional actors such as regional powers and regional organizations.

1.4 Organization and Structure

This study is divided into five distinct chapters. The first chapter presents the research objectives and questions, the background to the subject of study and an introduction to the thesis. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature that will be used as

²⁴ Malsin. (Nov 30, 2015).

a theoretical foundation to the research. Chapter 3 discusses, describes and justifies the methodology I used to accomplish the research objectives and answer the research questions. Chapter 4 represents the core of the research, in which I present and discuss the data pertaining to the theoretical pillars of the case study, and in which I build my case study in a coherent manner. It also includes a summary of the key findings. Finally, Chapter 5 includes an assessment of key findings, concluding notes and possible recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature is to present a review of the literature on the theoretical dimensions and issues that pertain to the subject of research. In general, it will address the dimensions that arguably present an explanation of the phenomenon in question, namely the rise of the Islamic State in Syria as a non-state actor and the national and regional factors that may have contributed to this development. More specifically, the review will focus on the literature related to state failure, identity politics, regionalism and balance of power, and power vacuum.

2.1 State Fragmentation and Failure

Traditionally, the study of state failure was associate with third world states that gained independence in the period after World War II, such as African states that suffered numerous serious challenges and weaknesses as a result of the legacy of colonialism. According to Ignatieff, “Huge sections of the world’s population have won the right to self-determination on the cruelest possible terms: they have been simply left to fend for themselves. Not surprisingly, their nation-states are collapsing.”²⁵

Colonialism in itself, however, does not explain state weakness and failure, partly because many states with a colonial legacy do not suffer such phenomena, and partly because these phenomena have occurred in states with no colonial history. In fact, the

²⁵ M. Ignatieff. (1993). *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*. Toronto: Penguin Books, pp.12-13.

definition of state weakness and state failure is in itself difficult, given the diverse theoretical and empirical approaches to this subject. Di John for example points out that state weakness is often characteristic of states with rent seeking economies which encourage patronage and corruption.²⁶ However, the rent economy and corruption do not in their own right explain state weakness although they may be significant contributors to it, especially when numerous states with rent economies seem to exhibit varying degrees of weakness.²⁷ Given this variation, the Crisis States Research Center at the London School of Economics (2006) developed a more detailed classification of state weakness. Hence, fragile states were defined as those states which are significantly vulnerable to crisis in one or more of their subsystems such that they have faced serious difficulties or lack of capacity when dealing with internal or external shocks.²⁸ At a more acute level of weakness are ‘crisis states’ which are under acute stress and which are unable to manage conflict or shocks, as they tend to face a serious danger of state failure.²⁹ The last level is the ‘failed state’ which refers to states that can no longer perform their basic security and development functions or to exercise control over their territories and borders.³⁰

Despite such classifications, theorists still have perceived state weakness from a number of angles. For example, Ignatieff argues that a weak state becomes a failed state once it has lost monopoly of the means of violence.³¹ However, this emphasis on the monopoly of the means of violence to distinguish weak and failed states is overly

²⁶ J. Di John. (2008). “Conceptualizing the causes and consequences of failed states.”, p.1.

²⁷ M. Marshall & T. Gurr. (2003). *Peace & Conflict*, College Park: Center for International Conflict Management, p.16.

²⁸ Di John, 2008, p.9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.9.

³¹ M. Ignatieff. (2002). “Intervention and state failure.” *Dissent*, n.p.

simplistic. From a functional perspective, Bayart argues that a weak state is most likely one that has adopted a predatory function, which he refers to as politics of the belly. Such a state manages the relationship between patrons and clients and it's merely seen as a source of benefit for those who have access to it. Eventually, this state will reach a point where it can no longer serve beneficiary and will be susceptible to conflict.³²

Lockwood also proposes another functional theory to define and explain state weakness by using three criteria that arguably prevail in states with colonial legacies. First, those states do not have citizens but rather, subjects of tribal or communal leaders, which implies loyalty to individuals or groups rather than the state itself. Secondly, weak states are bifurcated as they are characterized not only by significant and distinct divisions along the rural and the urban, but the state itself develops and implement different policies for urban and rural areas and populations. Thirdly, weak states are characterized by despotic regimes which tend to be repressive by nature.³³ However, this model does not predict the degree of state weakness or whether such states may be stable for long periods of time or approaching failure under certain conditions.

Other theorists, however, have focused on specific characteristics that predict the failure of weak states. For example, Helman and Ratner argued that a weak state approaches a failure stage when it becomes “utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community.”³⁴ More specifically, such a state becomes a danger to its own citizens since it can no longer protect them or provide them with security,

³² J. F. Bayart. (1993). *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. Paris: Fayard, p.21.

³³ M. Lockwood. (2005). *The State They're In: An Agenda for International Action on Poverty in Africa*. UK: ITDG Publishing, p.70.

³⁴ G. Helman & R. Ratner. (1993). “Saving failed states.” *Foreign Policy*, v.89, p.3.

and it may be a threat to its neighbors as a result of the outflow of refugees not to mention the threats of political instability and random warfare.³⁵

Alternatively, other theorists have argued that state weakness and failure can be depicted by assessment of the ability of the state to carry out its most basic and fundamental internal functions. Hence, state failure refers “to a situation where the structure, authority (legitimate power), law and political order have fallen apart.”³⁶

Despite this emphasis on the issues of political stability and control over means of violence, controlling borders and security, other theorists have focused on the economic and developmental dimensions of state functions. For example, Rotberg argues that a weak state suffers weakness in its ability to deliver basic and fundamental functions such as security, economic development, political representation, income distribution, education, healthcare and many others, arguing that “nation states fail because they can no longer deliver positive political goods to their people. Their governments lose legitimacy, and in the eyes and hearts of a growing plurality of its citizens, the nation state itself becomes illegitimate.”³⁷ Rotberg refers to this as “the new nature of state failure” because state failure, he argues, is a process that over time afflicts multiple functions of the state, resulting in the failure of the institutional framework of the state and eventually in the collapse of political power and security as state legitimacy wears off.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid., p.3.

³⁶ W. Zartman. (1995). “Introduction: Posing the Problem of Collapsed States.” In W. Zartman (ed.) *Collapsed States*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, p.1.

³⁷ R. Rotberg. (2002). “The new nature of nation-state failure.” *Washington Quarterly*, v.25. pp.85.

³⁸ Ibid., p.86.

Other theorists, however, have pointed out that the failure of the state does not necessarily lead to state collapse, an observation that has been seen in several cases such as Tanzania and Zambia. On the other hand, it seems that such weaknesses are more likely to lead to state failure when state weakness is associated with ethnic or similar clashes as well as with a population increase and population density.³⁹ Fairhead, however, argues that it is not the scarcity resulting from state weakness that leads to state failure, but rather, the perceived marginalization of groups within society. Such perceived unfair marginalization does not result in clashes and conflicts over resources per se, but rather, over the right to access such resources. Accordingly, state failure may occur even if the degree of state weakness has not reached a critical stage, depending on the nature of conflict between communities in the state.⁴⁰

2.2 Identity Politics

The notion of identity politics is of high relevance to the case of ISIS in Syria for several reasons. First, ISIS emerged as an identity-based entity, namely an entity with a sectarian identity. Secondly, ISIS emerged in Syria as well as in Iraq at a time when identity conflicts were at their peak.

Identity politics has been defined in many ways, but according to Hayward and Watson, “Identity politics is the politics in which people engage when they mobilize on the basis of, and when they define their experiences, their political problems, and their aims in

³⁹ T. Homer-Dixon. (1999). *Environment, Scarcity and Violence*. New York: Princeton University Press.

⁴⁰ J. Fairhead. (2000). “The conflict over natural and environmental resources,” pp. 1-29. In E. Nafziger, F. Stewart and R. Varynen (eds). *War, Hunger and Displacement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.2.

terms of the good of identity groups.”⁴¹ Simply put, it is the politics of one group defining itself in separation from other groups and the rest of the world. Hence, identity politics may relate to any aspect or component or characteristic that defines the identities of a group, whether it is ethnic, racial, religious, sectarian, sexual, or gender related. In the context of liberal politics and democracies, identity politics is often associated with multiculturalism and the demand for special rights for minorities and groups. However, in the broader context, identity politics is more about the right of a group to be recognized, and whether this recognition entails specific rights and privileges.⁴²

In the context of liberal democracies, identity politics is about demanding recognition through policies that promote multiculturalism. However, in non-democratic and non-liberal contexts, identity politics can easily transform into a vehicle to mobilize identity-based communities to seek protection in means that may be violent; “when the state is unable to provide basic security and services for its citizens, they have to look to those communities that will protect them and in which they feel safe.”⁴³

In fact, it is this proposition or promise of protection that identity politics relies on to mobilize those who share an identity to achieve political goals. However, the process of identity politics is far more complex than merely promising protection and safety. Rather, it is first a process that aims at excluding others who do not share the identity and creating

⁴¹ C. Hayward and R. Watson. (2010). “Identity and Political Theory.” *Washington University Journal of Law and Policy*, v.33, p.9.

⁴² C. Taylor (1994). “The politics of recognition.” pp.25-36. In Amy Gutmann (ed). *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

⁴³ F. G. Gause III. (June 8, 2013). “Sectarianism and the politics of the new Middle East.” *Foreign Policy*, online.

boundaries to internally normalize those who share the identity.⁴⁴ This implies that identity politics is about the creation of exclusionary boundaries and invoking a mentality of being together against the world, a mentality that perceives others with distrust, insecurity and fear. Internally, the members of the identity-based group understand each other and the discourse and demands that they share, but externally, everyone else is unintelligible.⁴⁵

Identity politics can be a source of social and political diversity and enrichment, especially as it contributes to the recognition of difference and to the celebration of pluralism in a society. However, it can easily be transformed into a means that is used to justify hostility toward others and conflict with groups that are associated with other identities. As such, identity politics can become harmful, because although identity itself is not a source of harm or conflict, identity politics can be used to classify and identify almost any difference or action into a source of cruelty or injury.⁴⁶

Traditionally, identity politics emerged as a means by which communities and minorities expressed their grievances against certain injustices committed against them. However, as LaClau and Mouffe argue, identity politics can be used to express almost any form of grievances and to claim suffering political and social oppression. To do so, those utilizing identity politics do not even need to prove that injustices have been committed. Rather, it is sufficient to claim that the group or community has been oppressed to believe

⁴⁴ W. Brown. (1995). *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p.35.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.36.

⁴⁶ W. Connolly. (1991). *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. University of Minnesota Press, p.2.

that oppression has been afflicted to establish legitimacy of such claims among group members.⁴⁷

In attempting to explain the dynamics and implications of identity politics, Jacoby proposes a theory of victimhood. She suggests that identity politics is often exploited to create a sense of victimhood to mobilize the members of a community sharing the identity around the perception of injustice or oppression. The first step in this process is structural conductiveness whereby the formulators of identity politics identify the broad social conditions that can be interpreted as cruelty or oppression targeting the group members by other groups or by the state. In the second phase, the purpose is to develop political consciousness, that is, a high degree of awareness of the oppression of the group members, and the awareness that cruelty is targeting them in particular because they belong to the group. The third stage is ideological concurrence which involves linking the feeling and perception of oppression to a political agenda of awakening, rejection of oppression, and defiance. The fourth stage involves political mobilization where the intention of the group leaders is to mobilize the entire community behind the ideology of the group and the political action plan that intends at ending the oppression and correcting the injustice to which the group members are subjected. At this stage, the purpose is to ensure that the vast majority of the group members are supportive of the group leadership and of the decisions that they take toward others, which may be in the form of political struggle or even violent action. The last stage is achieving political recognition or the achievement of the goals of

⁴⁷ E. LaClau and C. Mouffe. (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso, pp.153-154.

the struggle in ways that satisfy the oppressed group and persuades its members that the wrong has been corrected and that their victimhood has been ended.⁴⁸

2.3 Balance of Power and Power Vacuum

The concept of balance of power is a classic concept in international relations that dates back to the ancient Greece, but which has received significant attention in the past two or three centuries. This concept is highly relevant to this case study because it relates to the central assumption that the rise of ISIS and other fundamental changes in Syria were in fact in part the result of major changes taking place within the framework of power shifts and power unbalances in the region, which ultimately resulted in the creation of a power vacuum that was eventually filled by ISIS. Hence, it is essential to address the concepts of regionalism, balance of power and power vacuum.

To start with, the concept of regionalism is very problematic to define because the concept of region is very fluid and constantly changing, to the point that some scholars have argued that this concept now risks becoming an “empty and meaningless idea.”⁴⁹ Traditionally, regions were defined as geographic areas that constituted of states that shared geographic proximity. Although geographic proximity still remains relevant, other forms of association are now widely considered in the formation of regions and in the development of regionalism. For example, the constructivist approach perceives regionalism as a social and cultural process where regions formed are perceived as cultural blocs; “regions are shaped by the collective perceptions of identities and meanings with

⁴⁸ T. Jacoby. (2015). “A thory of victimization: Politics, conflicts and the construction of victim-based identity.” *Journal of International Studies*, v.43, pp.513-515.

⁴⁹ R. Vayrynen. (2003). “Regionalism: old and new.” *International Studies Review*, v.5, pp.25.

blurred and ever shifting boundaries.”⁵⁰ An illustration of this would be the Islamic Cooperation Organization (ICO) where geographic proximity is of limited relevance whereas the cultural factor is fundamental.⁵¹

Regionalism in itself is not a new phenomenon. However, it has flourished in modern history, especially in the early 20th century when the first wave of regionalism was aimed at promoting regional and international security, specifically with the creation of the League of Nations. Most regional formations during this period witnessed limited success, but a second wave of regionalism followed after World War II including organizations such as the League of Arab States with a multipurpose platform and with the objective of promoting the wellbeing and the interests of member states.⁵² Regionalism, however, gained substantial importance after the end of the Cold War and the failure of the bipolar world, and the emergence of a unipolar world in which the United States acted as the only superpower. With the elimination of the Soviet threat, however, the US narrowed its involvement in world security issues, leaving many countries and regions facing security threats and challenges which they had to face on their own.⁵³

In the context of regionalism, regional arrangements that are primarily concerned with security are referred to as a regional security complex which is defined as “a group of states where primary security concerns link sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another.”⁵⁴ Although geographic

⁵⁰ Vayrynen, 2003, p.28.

⁵¹ L. Fawcett. (1996). “Regionalism in world politics: past and present.” In L. Fawcett & A. Hurrell (eds), *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organizations and International Order*, p.3.

⁵² Ibid., p.10.

⁵³ Vayrynen, 2003., p.32.

⁵⁴ B. Buzan. (1991). *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, p.90.

proximity and boundaries may be highly relevant as far as a regional security complex is concerned, this is not a necessary prerequisite as the case with NATO shows where the boundaries of security are constantly shifting to include geographic areas outside Europe.

On the other hand, Lake and Morgan refer to security-driven regions that are interested in maintaining stability among the member states as a regional order. Although a regional order may be concerned with security and the protection of member states from external threats as the case is with NATO in Europe, it is also highly concerned with maintaining order within the boundaries of the region, specifically by establishing a mode of conflict management within the region. This, for example, may be applicable to the League of Arab States which is concerned with a variety of goals and objectives, including the management of conflict among members.⁵⁵

While regionalism may be perceived from a variety of perspectives such as structure, function, or purpose, the concept of balance of power refers to a process by which nation states in a region or in the international political system act and interact to establish some form of balance among weaker states against a dominant state or a hegemon.⁵⁶ However, as Danilovic argues, the concept of balance of power often refers to a number of meanings, even within the contexts of international relations and political science.

Classical realist scholars such as Morgenthau define the balance of power as a process by which states aim at creating peaceful structural conditions that maintain peace in the international system. States, argues Morgenthau, exist in an anarchy where their

⁵⁵ D. Lake and P. Morgan. (1997). *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World Order*. State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, p.11.

⁵⁶ V. Danilovic. (2005). *When the Stakes Are High: Deterrence and Conflict among Major Powers*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, p.72.

ultimate purpose is to maximize their power and to maintain their security, and they do so by forming alliances with other states to fend off the threat of attack from a bigger state.⁵⁷ Likewise, Waltz points out that states are constantly concerned with their security, especially when a power gap exists between them and other states that may attempt to challenge their security by expanding their influence of sphere into their borders or by encroaching onto their interests.⁵⁸

In contrast, Wight argues that to establish and maintain peace with their more powerful neighbors or other more powerful major powers, states will pursue the creation of a balance of power, but they do so mainly to achieve an even distribution of power. Wight also argues that this is an inherent tendency in the international system which as such seeks a form of stability in the power relations between states.⁵⁹

The balance of power can be applied to almost any system in which different powers exist and interact, whether at the international level or within a regional context.⁶⁰ Moreover, one of its fundamental tenets is that states will form alliances to establish a balance of power that will deter the most powerful state or the hegemon from attacking them or from attempting to expand its sphere of influence into their territories.⁶¹ In contrast, theories of power shift or transition are based on a very different position, namely that when states form an alliance and their power becomes close or equivalent to that of the major power, they are likely to challenge the major power and engage in violent conflict

⁵⁷ H. Morgenthau. (1985). *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

⁵⁸ K. Waltz. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. Waveland PR Inc.

⁵⁹ M. Wight. (1966). "The Balance of Power." In H. Butterfield and M. Wright (eds). *Diplomatic Investigation: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*. London: Alken & Unwin, pp. 150-151.

⁶⁰ Vayrynen (2003), p.32.

⁶¹ S. Walt. (1987). *Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p.33.

against it. The perspective of balance of power, therefore, perceives global or regional interactions from the angle of a static outcome, that is, an outcome where relations of power are balanced and stable; power transition theories on the other hand, see the dynamics of interaction from the opposite perspective, proposing that a balance of power is more likely to instigate a violent confrontation among rivals.⁶²

However, as Vayryen points out, regions may appear and disappear as they are transformed by economic, political and cultural factors. This may be illustrated in the Middle East, a region which constitutes of Egypt and North Africa, the Levant and the Arab Peninsula, all of which may be seen to constitute sub-regions as well as components of one bigger region according to the geographic, cultural, economic and political variables used to define the region. However, even on the political and cultural levels, the boundaries of the Middle East are not necessarily static. For example, both Iran and Turkey may or may not be considered components of the region, not to mention that both countries have an interest in expanding their sphere of interest in the region on the political, economic, cultural and security levels. Moreover, transformations in regions may vary according to priorities. For example, during the Cold War, several countries in the Middle East sought to boost their security against regional threats through alliances with the United States or with the USSR.⁶³

Since the end of the Cold War, the issue of security has become a major concern for many states, specifically on the regional level. Monteiro argues that with the end of the Cold War and the creation of what seems to be a unipolar world, issues of security at the

⁶² J. Kugler & A. Organski. (1989). "The power transition: A retrospective and prospective evaluation." In M.I. Midlarsky (ed). Handbook of War Studies. London: Routledge, p.173.

⁶³ Walt (1987).

level of regions started to emerge. Within this period and context, the intensity of power transition and balance of power may be observed in many regions.⁶⁴

More specifically, the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new world order dominated by a unipolar superpower has meant that many regions became less critical from a security perspective. With the collapse of the USSR, the US no longer had to maintain its security and military presence in many world regions. The result, however, was the creation of power vacuums within such regions. Since power vacuum cannot be tolerated by states,⁶⁵ many regions that witnessed the formation of such power vacuums also witnessed new changes as they developed regional alliances or structures, or as tensions started to escalate within those regions as conflicting states attempted to fill in the power vacuum. As a result, some regions became more stable whereas others became more anarchic as the dynamics of interaction among states in those regions were aimed at achieving a balance of power or at attaining regional domination, “Given the great power-vacuum created by a disengaged unipole, each region beyond the unipole’s own can be treated as a small-scale quasi-system unto itself. The regions from which the unipole disengages are in effect insulated from the global mechanisms of conflict created directly by a unipolar structure. Each of these regions can be unipolar, bipolar or multipolar.”⁶⁶

Hence, a region from which the superpowers disengage is likely to witness a power vacuum. States in such a region will either form an alliance or some form of regional structure to stabilize the region and achieve a “regional order” to manage their conflicts

⁶⁴ N. Monteiro. (2014). *Theory of Unipolar Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.170.

⁶⁵ J. Garnett. (1984). *Common Sense and the Theory of International Politics*. Albany: University of New York Press.

⁶⁶ Monteiro, 1994, p.171.

and to maintain balance that fills the vacuum,⁶⁷ or will go to conflict against each other, especially if one or more state in that region wishes to dominate the others, or if a group of states attempt to create a balance of power against the dominant aggressive state. It is not surprising that the battlefield of this confrontation is likely to have the worst effects on the weakest states, especially those characterized by deeply rooted divisions along the rifts and lines of identity politics. In theory, this is likely to be the case especially if the conflict between the states in the region is not only about political, military, and economic power, but also over cultural and identity-related issues. In theory, it would not be surprising if such a regional conflict and the power vacuum persisted, making it indispensable for a new actor, which may come from outside the region or which may emerge from inside the region, to attempt to fill the persisting power vacuum.

⁶⁷ Lake & Morgan, 1997, p.11.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the methodology and data-collecting methods used to provide evidence needed to support the claims and propositions made in this study. The chapter will discuss the philosophy behind the methodology, the research approach and design, and the data-collecting instruments.

3.1 Research Philosophy & Approach

The phenomenon observed in this study is one that has been subject to all kinds of disputes claims, theories and interpretations. Needless to mention, the acute division among researchers, scholars, journalists, analysts and practitioners over interpreting this subject only confirms the proposition that the subject of this study is highly contentious and debatable, and that a scientific method is almost impossible to apply in studying the phenomenon.

Given the numerous claims about how the phenomenon evolved and the fact that conflicting interpretations and theories exist even as to identifying the causes and manifestations of the phenomenon, it becomes essential to explore a variety of theories, perspectives and propositions before making any solid conclusions. This, however, requires an interpretive approach since there is a high degree of uncertainty and a lack of reliable data or even data sources with respect to the factors contributing to the rise of ISIS.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Creswell, 2003.

3.2 Research Strategy: The Case Study Approach

The purpose of the research strategy is to be able to draw a roadmap that enables me to determine how the data will be collected and used in such ways that it will result in answering the research questions and to accomplish the knowledge-building goals of the research. For the purpose of this study, and given the nature of the phenomenon and the available data, the most adequate research strategy to address the research questions is by applying the case-study approach.

The case-study approach is suitable and recommended when the proposed research questions are fundamentally why and how questions that are attempting to explain how a phenomenon emerged and why it occurred in the first place.⁶⁹ Secondly, it is appropriate when there is no ability or resources of manipulating, influencing or controlling the behaviors of actors or players contributing to the phenomenon. More importantly, the case-study is recommended when the context of the phenomenon is very relevant to the point that may be as important as the phenomenon itself or even contributing to its occurrence. Similarly, this is an appropriate method when the boundaries between the content and the context of the case are so blurred that it is impossible at times to separate the two.⁷⁰

In principle, all these conditions apply quite swiftly to the phenomenon under study. To start with, it is almost impossible to separate the rise of ISIS from the national, regional and international contexts that have dominated the Middle East since the turn of the century. Secondly, the fundamental purpose of this research is to determine the factors that

⁶⁹ P. Baxter & S. Jack. (2008). "Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers." *The Qualitative Report*, v.13, no.4, pp. 544-559.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

led to the rise of ISIS in Syria and how this phenomenon occurred in its context so rapidly and with little resistance from national, regional and international actors, obstacles or actions. In addition to this, given the large number of actors and contributors to the phenomenon and the fact that it is impossible to control any of these actors -not to mention that the actors seem to have very limited control over the phenomenon- it seems only logical to consider the case-study as a research strategy approach to achieve the objectives of this research.⁷¹ Additionally, a case study may be explanatory, exploratory or descriptive,⁷² and it may also focus on the unique aspects of a phenomenon rather than seeking to draw comparisons with other phenomena.⁷³

To build my case study, I collected a variety of data types from a number of sources. The main sources of data include publications, statements, contemporary studies, media, and published materials from a wide variety of credible sources.

The main argument of my study is that several local and regional factors coincided to contribute to the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria. In building the case study, I formulate each of these alleged components individually, namely state weakness/fragmentation and failure, identity politics, and balance of power, all of which contributed to a power vacuum in Syria that offered the right time and place for the Islamic State to emerge.

Thus, upon the presentation, description and analysis of each of these factors and contextual components, I focus on integrating the interaction of these factors to show how

⁷¹ Creswell, 2003.

⁷² R. Yin. (2003). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

⁷³ R. Stake. (1995). *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

each contributed to the creation of a political power vacuum that eventually triggered the emergence of ISIS.

3.3 Case Study Binding

I adopt a mixed approach to binding my case study, mainly because of the nature of the phenomenon itself. The research will emphasize the study of the factors that led to the rise of the Islamic State in Syria, but the context includes not only Syria but also the surrounding region. Although the activities under study are emphasized in Syria, activities on the regional and global dimensions cannot be ignored since they are believed to have played a critical role in the occurrence of the rise of ISIS. Thirdly, although the time period emphasized in this case study ranges between 2010 and 2014, the fact is that the events that occurred in earlier periods are also highly relevant. Overall, however, I will maintain the focus of the study to local events occurring within the timeframe of 2010 till 2014 but with reference to regional and global actors, processes, and activities, as well as to events that have occurred in previous timeframes.

Chapter Four

Syria and the Rise of the Islamic State

4.1 Introduction

Shortly after the outbreak of the Arab Spring events in December 2010, speculations were made about which Arab state would be next, especially with the collapse of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, and amidst popular support all over the Arab world. Syria was never considered as a serious candidate for such uprisings, and even when the first demonstrations started in March 2011, they barely received any media attention or coverage.⁷⁴ This could have been attributed to a number of reasons.

First of all, although Syria was a secular despotic republic which placed it in the same category of regimes at risk such as Tunisia and Egypt, unlike the other regimes at risk, it enjoyed a unique positioning. Unlike the pro-American regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, Syria was positioned as a resistance State, a regime that supported the Palestinian struggle, and which opposed American hegemony. This was based on the false assumption that the Arab Spring was a political awakening movement that was fueled by anti-American sentiments.⁷⁵

Secondly, even when it became evident that the slogans of the Arab Spring were more about freedom, dignity, and popular demands that had very little to do with politics, both the media and analysts did not perceive Syria as a serious candidate to witness

⁷⁴ M. Champion & N. Malas. (Apr 29, 2011). "Turkey sends delegates to Syria in effort to spur reforms by Assad." *Wall Street Journal*, p.11.

⁷⁵ C. Phillips. (2011). "Syria's bloody Arab Spring." London School of Economics, IDEAS, pp.37-38.

uprisings. This was based on the assumption that Syria, despite the despotic nature of the regime, was nonetheless governed by a strong and capable state that was successful in providing for the needs of its people, and in maintaining the internal stability of the regime.⁷⁶ Moreover, while the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes were headed by ailing dictators, Syria was governed by the young Assad who had successfully consolidated his grip over power and who has survived several difficult tests since his rise to power after the death of his father in 2000.⁷⁷

Thirdly, unlike the Tunisia and Egyptian regimes that were heavily dependent on foreign political and economic aid for stability, the Syrian regime enjoyed its own legitimacy in addition to its historic success in building and maintaining a complex network of alliances and connections with strategic allies such as Iran and Russia.⁷⁸

Hence, it is not surprising that when the uprisings in Syria intensified, Syrian officials including President Assad himself brushed away any serious concerns by confidently announcing that Syria was different and that what applied to countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya was not applicable to Syria. Assad and Syrian officials were not alone in adopting this view. Arab media that were enthusiastically covering the events of the Arab Spring continued to pay very little attention to the developments in Syria for several months before it became evident that the uprisings were actually intensifying rather than coming to an end.⁷⁹ The carry-over of the war and sectarian violence left behind devastating effects on Syria's population and economy. By 2015, the death toll exceeded

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.37.

⁷⁷ S. Moubayed. (2000). "Syria's new president Bashar al-Assad: A modern-day Attaturk." The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, v.19, no.9, p.32.

⁷⁸ S. Mann. (Feb 9, 2012). "How the Arab League turned against Syria." *Open Democracy*, online.

⁷⁹ Champion & Malas (2011), p.11.

210,000 with more than 1.5 million Syrians severely injured or permanently disabled⁸⁰; around 6.5 million in need of humanitarian aid in Syria⁸¹ and more than 4 million refugees (out of a population of 23 million)⁸². The economic decline is reflected in a sharp decline in the Syrian currency with an overall impact estimated to reach \$80 billion in 2013⁸³, in addition to serious infrastructure destruction and ruined towns.

This chapter presents a case study that discusses how the intersection of several domestic and regional factors contributed to setting the ground for the rise of a non-state actor such as ISIS within Syria in the context of the Arab Spring. More specifically, the case roadmap aims at showing that state weakness and failure, identity politics, and regional power unbalances and shifts in the balance of power, all coincided at the same time to create a complex vacuum that could only be filled by an entity similar to ISIS.

4.2 The Weakness of the Syrian State

One of the central assumptions that prevailed during the Arab Spring events was that Syria was different from other Arab states simply because it was not a weak state, and hence, was not at risk of failure as the other regimes were. A critical analysis of the capabilities of the Syrian state, however, reveals that this was far from true, and that by 2011, the Syrian state was suffering very serious structural and inherent weaknesses on a number of levels.

⁸⁰“Syria Death Toll now Exceeds 210,000: Rights Group”. (2015). *Reuters*.

⁸¹“Numbers At A Glance”. (2015). *USAID*.

⁸²“Syria Regional Refugee Response”. (2015). *UNHCR*.

⁸³ Morris, L., & Ramadan, A. (2013). "Plunging Currency Adds to Syria's Gloom." *Washington Post*.

To start with, one of the prevalent assumptions for many years was that the Syrian state under the Assad regime enjoyed stability and immunity against domestic political unrest because the state had achieved a level of economic self-sufficiency, avoided economic or financial dependence on the west, and successfully managed to provide a satisfactory standard of living for its citizens.⁸⁴ It was often propagated in the media that with a decent infrastructure, free education and healthcare, and an economy controlled by the state, the Syrian people had accepted a tradeoff between freedom and a high standard of life combined with security.⁸⁵

In reality, however, this success story may have been far from real, and evidence shows that by 2011, the Syrian state had reached a serious degree of dysfunctionality that may have played an important role in undermining the internal legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of some of its constituents.⁸⁶

4.2.1 Economic Failure

Economic failure is one of the most important characteristics of state weakness and failure. Moreover, while Syrian officials and many analysts believed that Syria was immune to events similar to those of the Arab Spring because of the economic stability of the state, the evidence tells a different story. Evidence of persistent structural economic weakness and deterioration can be seen by assessing the fundamentals of the Syrian economy. Syria's trade balance suffered a deficit of \$981 million in 2004 which worsened

⁸⁴ Sarihan, 2012, p.67.

⁸⁵ K. Lally. (May 14, 2004). "For Syria, 'a long road' to reforms'; leader looking warily toward a hostile United States, President Bashar Assad says he hopes to bring needed changes." *The Sun*, p.13A.

⁸⁶ R. Hinnebusch & S. Schmidt. (2009). *The State and the Political Economy in Syria*. London: University of St. Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies.

to \$1.38 billion in 2005.⁸⁷ However, the state managed to achieve a balance in its current accounts as a result of the inflow of assets and investments with the arrival of over a million Iraqi refugees after the American invasion of Iraq. Thus for example, the current account balance jumped from a deficit of \$811 million in 2004 to a surplus of \$1.77 billion in 2005. Nevertheless, this respite lasted only for a short period of time, and in the three years from 2009 to 2011, the gap in the trade balance worsened from a deficit of \$3 billion at the beginning of the period to a deficit of \$7.66 billion by 2011. Even worse, the current account balance worsened from a deficit of \$1 billion to a deficit of \$8.65 billion during the same period.⁸⁸

The trade balance and current account balance reflect three important problems for the Syrian state. First of all, the figures reveal unsteady economic performance, specifically with respect to the expansion of the deficit which contributes to external debt, the drying up of capital inflows, and the overall weak performance of the economy. Secondly, despite the erratic pattern of the figures, the worsening of these economic fundamentals was persistent, which implies chronic economic weakness. Thirdly, the economic figures show that there is not much that could have been done in the short term when taking into consideration the fact that the state was improving its performance but not operating in a manner that could have been acceptable to most stakeholders.⁸⁹

Both the persistently worsening trade balance and current account balance figures imply that the Syrian economy was suffering a serious hemorrhage of foreign currency,

⁸⁷ R. Nasr. (2011). "Al-faqr fi Suriya: Mafaheem badeela." *Syrian Economic Society* (Translated).

⁸⁸ "Has he got away with it? Syria." *The Economist*, pp.44-45; "The Syria Report" (2005). *UNDP*. United Nations Development Program Publications; Haddad (2011).

⁸⁹ Sarihan(2012), p.168.

along with the accumulation of external debts payable in foreign currency. One of the risks associated with such patterns is the failure of the government to maintain the stability of its currency. Another more serious risk is the inability of the government to make internal investments in vital sectors or to allocate funds needed to finance internal services to society such as education, healthcare, and social security. However, the worsening pattern in current accounts and in trade balance is also a manifestation of an increasing dependence or a deteriorating export sector.

In 1996, manufacturing constituted 13% of Syria's GDP, but by 2000, it only represented 4% of the economy before jumping to 10% in 2002 again. From there on, however, the situation deteriorated in a persistent manner. In 2003, the Competitive Industrial Performance Index (CIPI) ranked Syria in the 75th position in a study of 88 developing countries, putting it ahead of only Yemen in terms of industrial development in the region.⁹⁰ The figures for agriculture are even much worse. In 1996 and in 2004, agriculture accounted for 25% of Syria's GDP. However, between 1996 and 2004, the performance of this sector was very erratic, declining by 5% in 1997, by 15% in 1999 and then rising by 10% in 2000. This was mainly attributed to a number of factors such as poor planning, bad management of water resources, and unstable weather conditions.⁹¹

Interestingly, between 2004 and 2009, Syria's GDP grew at an average of 5.7% annually, and per capita income increased at an average of 3.3% annually. These figures reflect an impressive economic performance, even by the standards of developed economies. They may also seem to be incompatible with claims of economic weakness or

⁹⁰ Lalla and Albadalaje (2003).

⁹¹ Ibid.

dysfunctionality. Moreover, these figures seem to reflect a different reality from the negative image pictured by the figures of trade balance and current accounts balance. However, when looking at the bigger picture and then at further details, it becomes apparent that the Syrian state was barely functional on the economic level by 2011.⁹²

Economic growth picked up in 2004, but in the period between 2001 and 2003, economic growth was almost 0%. Moreover, economic growth between 2004 and 2009 was fueled by two unstable and unreliable factors, both which depended on the ongoing crisis in neighboring Iraq. The first factor was the influx of over one million Iraqi refugees, many of whom were political refugees who brought large capitals with them. This reflected positively on the services sector as well as on the real estate sector, but the effect was not expected to last for more than three or four years at the most, especially as many well-to-do refugees invested their capital in real estate for the purpose of speculation rather than in productive sectors.⁹³ Hence, this inflow of capital supported the Syrian economy but only to a limited extent as it did not result in the creation of new jobs or in improving the sustainability of the economy. By the time Iraqi funds were depleted by 2009, this source of capital could not be replaced or renewed.⁹⁴ The second factor, also associated with the invasion of Iraq, was the sudden hike in oil prices which reached record levels during this period. Despite the limited oil production capacity, mining and manufacturing which represented only 3% of GDP in 1996 claimed a share of over 20% by 2004 alone.⁹⁵

⁹² D. Butter. (2015). "Syria's economy: Picking up the pieces." *Chatham House: Middle East & North Africa Programme*, pp. 8-10.

⁹³ Kaplan, 2008.

⁹⁴ Kaplan, 2008.

⁹⁵ M. Albaladejo & S. Lall. (2004).p.4.

Accordingly, the figures reflecting Syria's economic growth between 2004 and 2009 were in effect misleading, especially when taking a closer look at economic development at the structural level during the same period. More specifically, the severe inequality that characterized economic growth during this period, probably had a devastating impact on wide segments of society.

4.2.2 Poverty and Inequality

In contrast to the strong economic performance that prevailed during the 2000s, several studies reveal that during this period, poverty and inequality worsened to unprecedented levels. For example, while growth averaged 5.7% annually between 2004 and 2009, the real expenditure of households declined by 2.1% as a result of inflation and uneven distribution, and during the same period, the Consumer Price Index jumped by a severe 67%.⁹⁶

However, it is the uneven distribution of these hardships that is worth noting. For example, household expenditures in Tartous increased by a modest 0.9% and in Latakia by 2.4%, both of which were regions dominated by Alawites. In contrast, the regions with predominantly Sunni populations all witnessed a significant decline in household expenditures. The decline was mostly seen in the regions of Deyr el Zour (10.2%), Edleb (5.1%), Daraa (5.9%), Hama (2.6%) and Homs (1.8%). Incidentally, these were also the same regions that eventually revolted against the regime and which welcomed Islamist hardliners. Even in the capital Damascus, household expenditures were down by 3%.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Haddad, 2011.

⁹⁷ Haddad, 2011.

Poverty, at the same time, became prevalent. In 2004, the state reported a drop in poverty, but poverty rates were still high, with two million Syrians falling far below the line of extreme poverty, and with an overall population of 5.3 million representing 30.1% of the total population living at poverty lines. However, in rural areas, more than 62% of families lived under the line of poverty. This has serious implications on the economy as a whole and on the security and the stability of the regime itself. After all, more than 47% of Syrians depended on agriculture and lived in rural areas, areas that were predominantly Sunni and which were also hardest hit by poverty and inflation. At the same time, to control its deficit, the government resorted to reducing or canceling subsidies on numerous items that directly affected the poorest farmers, including subsidies on seeds, pesticides, fertilizers, machinery and equipment.⁹⁸

To make matters worse, Syria was hit by the worst drought in its modern history between 2006 and 2010. The worst effects of the droughts were seen in the northeastern and in the southern regions. Communications between the Syrian government and the United Nations Food Program reveal that in 2008 alone, the Syrian government expressed its dire need for assistance to prevent 15,000 families from leaving their agricultural lands in Northeast Syria in the region of Raqqa, expressing its concern that the social and economic fabric of the communities in those areas is under severe strain.⁹⁹ The communications revealed that by 2010 over one million farmers from Northeast Syria had left their lands permanently and moved to settle in the outskirts of urban centers. By 2010, Syrian cities were already hosting more than one million Iraqi refugees, and on top of this,

⁹⁸ Abdul Rahman (2011).

⁹⁹ F. Biedermann. (Oct 9, 2009). "UN warns of slow response to disaster caused by Syria's drought." *Financial Times*, p.8.

another million farmers moved to poverty belts with no employment potentials or qualifications or resources to escape poverty.¹⁰⁰ Many of these farmers who had lost their lands and their incomes eventually became recruited into the war that continues to devastate Syria.¹⁰¹

Since over 47% of Syria's population worked in agriculture and relied on it as a source of income, the combined impact of the weak state policies and the severe drought must have been devastating, especially on the social and economic levels. Thousands of families did not only leave their land to the cities in search for low income jobs, but it is also likely that hundreds of thousands of young Syrians were pulled out of school to help support their families during this period. In turn, these would have found themselves in an endless vicious cycle of poverty and unemployment, especially as the inequality gap continued to grow wider. Figures from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for 2010 reveal that the inequality gap in Syria had been worsening persistently after 2005, not only among the poor and the rich, but also on gender basis. Thus, for example, by 2010, tertiary education enrolment rates were 12% only for female versus 17% for males, but even for both genders, the rates were extremely low, especially in rural areas. In addition to this, almost 24% of the population only had completed secondary school education, with many families pulling their children out to help generate incomes.¹⁰² This deterioration in development achievement was not only alarming, but also unprecedented. For example, Syria which was once among the leading nations in the region in terms of

¹⁰⁰ Friedman, 2014, p.A21.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Charles & Denman, 2012.

combating illiteracy and gender inequality was ranked 124th out of 135 countries in terms of gender equality in 2010.¹⁰³

Hence, while GDP doubled to reach \$60 billion by 2010, institutional failure, poor management of the economy, and growing inequality did not contribute to the stability of the regime or the state.¹⁰⁴ Rather, and to the contrary, despite the high expectations of real economic reforms by Bashar Assad upon inhering power from his late father in 2000, the overall outcomes of economic policies between 2000 and 2010 turned out to be disastrous with respect to poverty, unemployment, and inequality. In addition to the dismal poverty and inequality figures, inequality was estimated to be over 30%, and probably much higher in rural regions and in the peripheries.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, economic activity and productivity became more concentrated more than ever in the hands of a few families that monopolized the most vital economic sectors.¹⁰⁶

At the same time, the massive bureaucracy which employed over two million people became more corrupt and incompetent than ever, while the state and the economy lacked a severe shortage of competent technocrats. This contributed to a state of economic stagnation, especially among the less privileged social groups. Moreover, all this was coupled with the ineffective courts system and the unprecedented spread of corruption, which resulted in scaring away potential foreign investors.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Hausmann, Tyson & Zahidi, 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Goldstone, 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Kaplan, 2008.

¹⁰⁶ Kaplan, 2008.

¹⁰⁷ Kaplan, 2008.

As far as the peripheral areas were concerned, the state was no longer present, suffering institutional aging and paralysis, and rapidly receding from those areas as it was no longer able to provide many of its basic services. Decline and collapse affected multiple social and economic services at the same time including schooling and education, healthcare, water, and many others.¹⁰⁸ For example, by the end of 2010, it was reported that over 12.7% of Syrian homes had no access to clean water, while 6.5% of the population expected to die before reaching the age of 40. In addition to this, illiteracy among adults was at 14.8% while the quality of education achieved by children and youth was of very low quality.¹⁰⁹

Corruption, incompetence and inefficiency had been chronic characteristics of the Syrian state for many years. Hafez Assad adopted populist economic strategies and a vast network of patronage to coopt various potential sources of threat and non-Alawite groups and communities. Hence, the corruption was mostly aimed at maintaining loyalties and ensuring that different constituencies had access to the system. Under Bashar, however, corruption and state paralysis and institutional incompetence reached unprecedented levels, but without any real or systematic efforts to coopt potential opposition groups.¹¹⁰ To the contrary, his political economic strategies resulted in further concentration of economic resources in the hands of a smaller group of beneficiaries who were related to him personally, while alienating various other groups that were traditionally loyal to the regime, specifically outside the Alawite sect. As a result, the failure of economic policies and the

¹⁰⁸ Charles & Denman, 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Nasr, 2011.

¹¹⁰ Kaplan, 2008.

failure of the state to provide economic benefits led to questioning the legitimacy of the regime across wide sectors of society, especially outside the Alawite community.¹¹¹

Overall, after a whole decade in power, Bashar Assad's regime was in serious economic trouble despite the impressive economic growth levels posted between 2004 and 2010. Without a real political economic strategy, de-industrialization led to the collapse of the manufacturing sector and its ability to create jobs, generate incomes, and support exports. At the same time, agriculture collapsed as well a result of poor management of resources, the ending of subsidies, and eventually the worst drought in the history of Syria, forcing over a million farmers to leave their lands and to move to the cities where they resided in poverty belts in conditions of extreme poverty and hopelessness.¹¹² In addition to this, the state was also suffering severe failure with respect to its ability to deliver basic services at basic quality to peripheral areas and regions with respect to potable water, education, and healthcare.¹¹³ To make matters worse, the fruits of the economic growth witnessed over the same period were unevenly distributed to the benefit of the few families associated with the regime, which monopolized economic activity and excluded other relevant constituencies. Accordingly, the foundations of the social contract that legitimized the Assad regime were severely weakened as the regime was unable to provide the basic services or the standards of an acceptable quality of life for most Syrians, specifically Syrians from outside the Alawite sect.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Kaplan, 2008.

¹¹² F. Biedermann. 2009, p.8.

¹¹³ Friedman, 2014, p.A21.

¹¹⁴ Kaplan, 2008.

The claim that Syria was different because it was a strong and stable state, therefore, cannot be taken at face value. It is true that the regime was still strong and capable in terms of security and intelligence. For example, it is claimed that even under Bashar Assad, one security personnel was allocated for every 150 citizens. However, the legitimacy of this regime did not solely depend on its grip over power or ability to intimidate and silence the opposition. Rather, it also depended heavily on its ability to deliver reliable social and economic public goods to its society and to coopt various influential communities to maintain their loyalty to the regime. By the end of 2010, however, this was no longer the case, and the regime's legitimacy that relied on the function of a strong state was seriously eroded.¹¹⁵

The gradual but persistent weakening of the state and its increased failure to deliver public goods and services to significant portions of the population, however, was worsened by the nature of the constituents that were affected negatively by the erosion of the state function.

One of the most important functions of the state under Assad was to maintain the legitimacy and stability of the regime. Under Hafez Assad, for example, the public goods and benefits offered by the state were distributed meticulously and with precision to ensure support from various constituents.¹¹⁶

In the 1970s and 1980s, Hafez Assad became fully aware of the importance of maintaining legitimacy and support, not only among his own Alawite sect where he was

¹¹⁵ T. Pierret. (2014). "The Syrian Baath party and Sunni Islam: Conflicts and convenience." Crown Center for Middle East Studies, *Middle East Brief*, no.77.

¹¹⁶ I. Aoude. (1997). "The political economy of Syria under Assad." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, v.19, no.4, pp.191-192.

challenged by his own brother, Rifaat, but also from the Sunni majority - which constitutes around 70% of the population¹¹⁷ - where the legitimacy of the regime was challenged by the traditional upper class as well as by Muslim Brotherhood which enjoyed a substantial popular base in rural areas as well as in lower class rural areas. Hafez Assad learned his lessons about loyalties and legitimacy the hard way, specifically through the failed attempt coup d'etat by his own brother and later from the bloody events of Hamah when his regime was challenged by the Muslim Brotherhood.¹¹⁸

Hence, the state was built on a system of patronage and rentier-like networks and relations that were intended to ensure access for specific constituents to state resources in return for loyalty. Under Bashar Assad, as under his father before him, the main military, security and other intelligence posts were restricted for the most loyal member of the Alawite sect. The loyalty of other minorities, especially Christians and Druze were also maintained through this system. The more complex challenge, however, was maintaining the loyalty of the Sunni majority whose support was indispensable for the legitimacy and stability of the regime.¹¹⁹

With respect to the Sunni majority, Hafez Assad appeased the Sunni bourgeoisie and upper middle class by including them in the network of patronage. These constituted of the class of merchants and industrialists who thrived under the regime, especially in the urban and commercial centers such as Damascus and Aleppo. On the other hand, the urban areas in which the Sunnis constituted a majority of the population were given special

¹¹⁷ J. Sharp. (2012). *Armed Conflict in Syria: U.S. and International Response*. Congressional Research Service. p. 27

¹¹⁸ T. Pierret. (2014). *Middle East Brief*, no.77, p.3.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

attention by the state as the infrastructure was developed in addition to the constituent flow of subsidies and relatively high quality public services such as schooling and healthcare.¹²⁰

Since the 1990s, state resources became increasingly strained, and the regime struggled to maintain the ability of the state to distribute public goods and to ensure access to resources and to rents. However, after Bashar Assad took over, this ability was seriously eroded and weakened. In the decade that followed the rise of Bashar Assad to power, the continued weakness of the state quickly translated into a failure in one of its most important functions, namely to maintain the loyalties of various constituents, especially the loyalty of Sunni groups. This happened on at least two levels.

On the first level, Assad quickly lost much of the support of the Sunni bourgeoisie in the urban and commercial centers. Shortly after his rise to power, he declared a wide array of reforms that were welcome on the national level. However, within less than a year, Assad had turned against his political and economic reforms and even replaced his father's loyal old guard with new loyalists as members of his inner circle.¹²¹ While this was not unexpected in any power succession, unlike his father, Bashar Assad did not take the sectarian factor into consideration. It is true that he was at first popular among the Sunnis since he himself was married to one, his new reforms resulted in excluding and alienating the majority of Sunni power brokers in the regime and in replacing them by loyalist Alawites who were close to him on the personal level.¹²² The major problem with the rearrangement of the power base within the regime, however, is that both political and

¹²⁰ Sarihan, 2012, pp.71-72.

¹²¹ E. Zisser. (2003). "Does Bashar al-Assad rule Syria?" *Middle East Quarterly*, v.10, no.1, pp.15-6.

¹²² B. Slavin. (Mar 14, 2005). "Bashar Assad: A powerful leader or 'an empty vessel'?" *USA Today*, p.A14.

economic reforms resulted in ensuring that the system is not going to work for the Sunni majority.¹²³

As a result, both influential Sunni figures within the regime and major Sunni economic actors were eventually excluded and replaced by Alawite partners and supporters. This particularly intensified after 2005 with the assassination of Rafic Hariri, the powerful Sunni leader in Lebanon, and the subsequent Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon as Assad's regime was accused of this assassination. By 2010, however, Assad had lost much of his power base among the Sunni urban bourgeois and merchants, especially as the key resources of the state were further concentrated in the hands of a few loyalists who mostly belonged to the closed Alawite circle of the president.¹²⁴

The bigger impact, however, was in the rural Sunni areas that were devastated by the failure of the state to maintain the provision of essential public goods and services that were considered necessary to maintain the loyalty of the peripheral populations. In fact, with the deterioration of state capacity especially in the peripheral areas, the state was not even able to maintain the social fabric of agricultural communities in those peripheral areas, specifically the areas dominated by Sunni populations. As a result, hundreds of thousands were forced to leave their barren lands and homes in a massive migratory movement to the cities in the hope of finding better sources of income. However, with no capital, education, or occupational skills, the majority of these migrating families ended in

¹²³ Kaplan, 2008.

¹²⁴ J. Greenstock. (2013). "The civil war is still to come: With no clear successor to Assad, Syria faces a bloody power vacuum." *The Guardian*, p.38.

forming poverty belts around the capital and other cities, adding to the burdens of the ailing social security system, and representing a ticking time bomb for a state in decline.¹²⁵

4.3 The Regional Order and Syria's Position

While Syria is often referred to as the “throbbing heart” of the Arab nation in the rhetoric of the Baath party, the geopolitical reality is that Syria is probably a weaker link in the regional system.¹²⁶ In fact, Syria is constantly insecure, bordered by Turkey to the north, Lebanon and Israel to the West, Jordan to the South, and Iraq to the East. Syria has had controversial and troubled relations with each and every one of these neighbors, not to mention its strategic state of enmity and hostility with Israel.¹²⁷ Moreover, while Iraq represents Syria's strategic depth against any hostilities with Israel, the uneasy fact is that relations with Iraq had historically been difficult and challenging. Accordingly, since the 1970s, Syria under Hafez al-Assad has had to engage in continuous strategic moves to maintain a delicate balance of power with its primary enemy, Israel. This is not to mention that Syria has had to manage its position in several balances of power that were constantly changing in the highly unpredictable regional politics of the Middle East.¹²⁸

4.3.1 An Unstable Regional Order

To start with, Syria's main concern has always been to establish a balance of power against Israel and possibly the United States in the region. Consequently, it has had to rely

¹²⁵ Friedman, 2014, p.A21.

¹²⁶ H. Kandil. 2010. “The challenge of structuring Syrian foreign policy.” In B. Korany and A. Dessouki, eds. *The Foreign Policies of the Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, p.438.

¹²⁷ Zisser, 2007, p.88.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

on alliances with Egypt and Iraq, while at the same time struggling to maintain control over Lebanon which constitutes its soft side. Dominating Jordan and maintaining control over the Palestinian factions has also been a strategic concern, as a means to balance Israel's military superiority and the unlimited military support it enjoys from the US. Throughout the 1980s, this balance of power was heavily dependent on the Soviet Union.¹²⁹

Secondly, throughout the 1980s, Syria established a close alliance with Iran as a means to counterbalance its hostile neighbor, Iraq. Iran was also a strategic ally in counterbalancing Israel through the activities of Hezbollah in Lebanon, all of which were orchestrated through the Syrian regime.¹³⁰ Yet at the same time, the Syrian regime had to engage in very delicate politics to maintain this alliance without earning the hostility of the GCC nations, especially Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was strategically important in Syria's game of maintaining multiple balances of power for two reasons. The first was the fact that the power center in the Arab world had shifted from Egypt to Saudi Arabia as a result of Egypt's expulsion from the League of Arab States following its peace treaty with Israel. The second factor was the fact that Syria was increasingly dependent on Saudi economic ties and support.¹³¹

Thirdly, Syria had to maintain another delicate balance of power with its hostile neighbors in Turkey and Iraq, a balance that was often established and maintained by providing support to Kurdish dissident groups in both countries. Establishing a balance of power with Turkey was particularly critical for two reasons; first because Turkey

¹²⁹ Robert G. Rabil. (2001). *Syria, the US, and the War on Terror in the Middle East*. London: Praeger Security International, p.112.

¹³⁰ Leverett, 2005, p.110.

¹³¹ Zisser, 2001, p.75.

controlled the inflow of the Euphrates waters into Syria, and secondly because Turkey was not only a member of NATO, but it had also established a strategic alliance with Israel, an alliance that was very threatening to Syria on its northern and eastern fronts.¹³²

Syria also engaged in a long series of strategic and tactical moves that aimed at establishing some balance with the US through attempting to control or hinder the peace process sponsored by the US between Israel and the Palestinians. In part this was aimed at ensuring that Syria was not left out of any bargain since it was claiming the Golan Heights from Israel. Secondly, these tactics provided Syria with cards to play in the face of any potential pressures or threats.

In the 1990s, two major changes upset the balances of power that Syria had been struggling to establish under Hafez al-Assad. The first was the demise of the Soviet Union, Syria's most important strategic ally and its major political, military and economic supporter.¹³³ The second was Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the consequent liberation of Kuwait by the international coalition in which Syria participated side by side with other armies under the leadership of the US. While joining forces with the US to liberate Kuwait was an opportunity for Syria to ease relations with the US and minimize American threats, and an opportunity to weaken its neighbor Iraq while improving relations with the GCC countries, there were three dangerous outcomes of these developments for Syria. First, while Iraq was an uneasy neighbor, it was still Syria's strategic depth in case of war with Israel;¹³⁴ secondly, with the Soviet Union gone, Syria was alone without a strategic ally

¹³² Robert G. Rabil. (2001). *Syria, the US, and the War on Terror in the Middle East*. London: Praeger Security International, p.113.

¹³³ Rabil, 2001, pp. 112-113.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

against Israel; thirdly, Syria lost most of its power cards during the peace process since the liberation of Kuwait enabled the US to start the peace process with much greater freedom without interference from Syria. In reflecting on the sensitivity of the new regional order, Hafez al-Assad expressed his serious concerns about the lost equilibrium in a public speech in 1991, “But significant changes took place in this equilibrium...the world today is turbulent and it is not clear where it is heading or what its last stop will be.”¹³⁵

Despite the unpredictable nature of the regional order, Hafez al-Assad was skillful in crafting alliance with the awareness that Syria needs “to place itself at the center of regional politics; and because this role is clearly beyond its military, economic and political capabilities, the regime has had to pursue skillful and, to a great extent, unorthodox tactics to secure its bid for hegemony.”¹³⁶ Shortly before his death in 2000, Hafez al-Assad had successfully maintained Syria’s hegemony over Lebanon with the approval of Saudi Arabia and the United States, strengthened Syria’s alliance with Iran without upsetting the Gulf countries, rebuilt a closer relationship with Egypt, and improved relations with Turkey after turning over the leader of the radical Kurdish opposition, Abdallah Ocalan. The only loss that he suddenly suffered was the unexpected Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, which deprived Syria of the ability to capitalize on Hezbollah’s capacity to harass and pressure Israel and the United States.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Zisser (2007), p.129.

¹³⁶ Korany & Dessouki, 2010, p.437.

¹³⁷ Zisser, 2007, p.94.

4.3.2 A New Order in the Middle East

Hafez al-Assad invested significant effort and time in grooming his son for succession in addition to preparing an extensive script on how to deal with the three major regional issues facing Syria, namely hegemony over Lebanon, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and maintaining a regional balance of power, two factors upset this plan. The first constituted of the rapid and unprecedented changes that swept through global politics, and the second was the unexpected changes in the regional order which resulted in massive shifts and transitions in power and in changing the weights of various critical players.¹³⁸

To start with, Syria suddenly lost its leverage against Israel with the unexpected Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000, just weeks before Hafez al-Assad's death. Then just over a year later, the September 11 attacks brought the US to the region in an unprecedented manner, first with the invasion of Afghanistan and also with its threat to invade Iraq, which was a threat as it would have placed the US military force at Syria's borders.¹³⁹ Shortly after in 2002, Syria took a radical position in opposing the Arab peace initiative that was announced in Beirut, placing itself for the first time in a position of opposition to the major Arab powers, namely Saudi Arabia and Egypt.¹⁴⁰ During his long reign, Hafez al-Assad never hesitated to adopt radical positions against powerful Arab countries, but he had always maintained a balance. If he turned against Egypt, he made sure he was on good terms with Saudi Arabia and Iraq and vice versa. Moreover, Hafez al-Assad did not hesitate to upset Iran on multiple occasions for the purpose of maintaining a

¹³⁸ Flynt Levertt. (2005). *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, pp. 109-110.

¹³⁹ Salem, 2008, p.11.

¹⁴⁰ A. Ben-Meir. (2009). "Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative." *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development*, no.14.

balance of power within the Arab region. Bashar, on the other hand, did not seem interested in these tactics. Rather, by bitterly opposing the Arab peace initiative, he effectively lost all his Arab allies and became dependent on Iran as the only strategic alliance in the region.¹⁴¹

On the other hand, Bashar managed to improve relations with Turkey and with Iraq, in a way creating a new balance of power despite the loss of Arab allies. However, he once again took another big risk when he openly and aggressively opposed the American invasion of Iraq.¹⁴² While other Arab regimes also opposed this invasion along with Iran, Syria's concern was that if the US placed its troops at its borders, then it was going to be the next target of an American invasion.¹⁴³ When the US finally invaded Iraq, Syria did not hesitate to open its borders to welcome fleeing Iraqi Baathists and to encourage Iraqi insurgents to attack American troops in an attempt to make the American presence in Iraq as uncomfortable as possible.¹⁴⁴

Syria's radical opposition to the American invasion of Iraq did not go unpunished, and the US retaliated by passing the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, threatening Syria to force its withdrawal from Lebanon. After the assassination of Lebanese former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in which Syria was implicated, Syrian troops were forced to withdraw from Lebanon in 2005.¹⁴⁵ Despite this severe blow to Syria's strategy of maintaining a regional balance of power through

¹⁴¹ Salem, 2008, p.7.

¹⁴² E. Zisser. (2007). *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power*. London: I.B. Tauris, p.141.

¹⁴³ Salem, 2008, p.18.

¹⁴⁴ Zisser, 2007, p.144.

¹⁴⁵ Zisser, 2007, p.142.

hegemony, Syria still maintained strong influence in Lebanon through Hezbollah, Iran's strong arm in Lebanon. However, this only meant more dependence on Iran, whereas during the 1990s, Hafez al-Assad kept his alliance with Iran under check by maintaining control over Hezbollah.¹⁴⁶

By the end of 2006, Syria was struggling in a completely new regional order. Having gone too far against the US in Iraq, having lost its direct control over Lebanon, having opposed the Arab peace initiative, and having submerged itself completely in the Iranian alliance during the Israeli war against Hezbollah in 2006, Syria had become completely isolated on the regional and international levels. While it still maintained warm relations with Turkey and some degree of deterrence against Israel, Syria had no other friends in the region except Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.¹⁴⁷ While this uneasy alliance provided Syria with a temporary sense of security on the military level, especially in terms of deterrence against Israel, it was of very little value on the economic level, especially as Iran itself was facing very severe economic and political sanctions over its nuclear program. On the other hand, the return of Russia to the region was still unconfirmed, especially as the Russians were not willing to confront the US over Syria.

Despite this strategic isolation, Syria was offered multiple opportunities to improve its regional position. For example, Saudi Arabia and Egypt offered Syria several opportunities to rejoin the Arab front of moderate states, and at the same time, Europe led by France, offered Syria both economic and political incentives. However, as these efforts were primarily aimed at pulling Syria away from its strategic alliance with Iran, their

¹⁴⁶ Leverett, 2005, p.110.

¹⁴⁷ Salem, 2008, p.19.

success was very limited and short-lived.¹⁴⁸ As far as Bashar al-Assad was concerned, the strategic alliance with Iran was final.¹⁴⁹ The problem with this Syrian policy, however, is that Syria was not merely joining an opposing axis to the major Arab countries especially Saudi Arabia, but rather, that it was positioning itself as an ally of Iran which was perceived by Saudi Arabia and other GCC and Arab countries as a serious threats to the stability of those regimes.¹⁵⁰

At the end of 2010, therefore, Syria had positioned itself within a strategic axis that included Iran and the new pro-Iran regime in Iraq, and which also included Hezbollah and Hamas. On the one hand, this positioning ensured some degree of security and relative balance of power in the region, especially vis-à-vis the US and Israel. In fact, despite the radical nature of this positioning which placed Syria straight against the major Arab states in the region, all the bets of the regime paid off, achieving strategic gains through Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and Iraq, not to mention the strengthened relationship with Russia. On the other hand, this positioning exposed Syria to a very subtle weakness that could turn into a serious threat if the nature of the confrontation changed from political to sectarian.¹⁵¹

Throughout his years in power, Hafez al-Assad always managed Syria's positioning with great care to accommodate for the fact that he was an Alawite ruler of a country dominated by a Sunni population in the middle of a Sunni-dominated Arab world. This is probably why he was careful to ensure that no matter how strong his alliance with

¹⁴⁸ Y. Al-Saadi. (2012). "Saudi-Syrian relations: A historic divide." *Al-Akhbar English*.

¹⁴⁹ Al-Saadi (2012).

¹⁵⁰ "Isolating Assad: The Arab League has turned against Syria's president, as has the king of Jordan." (Nov 15, 2011). Los Angeles Times, p.A26.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Iran was, he always maintained warm relations with major Sunni powers in the Arab world, especially Saudi Arabia.¹⁵² By positioning Syria as the leading Arab nationalist power and the defender of the Palestinian cause, Hafez al-Assad was able to maintain the legitimacy of his regime in the Arab world, even when he was at odds with some major Sunni powers. Moreover, the alliance with Iran during Hafez al-Assad's reign was always placed in the context of balancing Saddam Hussein's aggressiveness which also targeted the Sunni Gulf countries.¹⁵³

More importantly, Hafez al-Assad was fully aware that Arab nationalism was almost defunct since the 1967 Arab defeat and that Islamic conservatism was taking the lead in the Arab world, especially in the absence of Egypt from the Arab political scene.¹⁵⁴ Hence, his positioning of Syria as the last bastion of Arab nationalism while maintaining close relations with the conservative Islamic countries of the Gulf was actually intended to maintain the legitimacy of the Alawite regime through supporting the Palestinian cause while shielding away the potential ideological threat of Islamic conservatism.¹⁵⁵

Unlike his father, Bashar al-Assad ignored the complexity of this subtle issue. While he was successful in establishing a balance of power through his alliance with Iran and Iraq as well as Hezbollah, this positioning also proved to be seriously flawed as it placed Syria at the heart of what became known as the Shiite Crescent extending from Tehran to Beirut. From a sectarian perspective, the Shiite Crescent became the ultimate existential threat to the conservative Sunni states of the Arab world rather than Israel itself.

¹⁵² Buchs, 2009, p.28.

¹⁵³ Kandil, 2010, p.437.

¹⁵⁴ P. Salem. (2008). The Middle East: Evolution of a broken regional order." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, no.9.

¹⁵⁵ Kandil (2010), p.437.

Hence, while a balance of power was established on the basis of political power alone, once the sectarian issue became involved, this balance of power vanished and Syria became internally vulnerable in the face of identity politics to blow.¹⁵⁶

4.4 The Winds of Identity Politics

Until just two years prior to the eruption of the Arab Spring, the Syrian regime still enjoyed a high degree of popularity both at home and on the Arab street. Despite the implication of Syria in the assassination of Lebanon's Rafic Hariri who was perceived as a powerful Sunni leader, the perceptions of Assad remained positive, especially following the July war of 2006 in which Syria and Iran sided squarely with Hezbollah against Israel. The subsequent siege of Gaza and Israel's failure to defeat Syria's ally, Hamas, in Gaza, was also another factor that continued to strengthen the position of the regime both at home and in the Sunni public street across the Arab world.¹⁵⁷

On the other hand, several shifts and transitions in the regional order as well as the strategic positioning which the Syrian regime chose to establish a balance of power vis-à-vis its Arab rivals in the region all created a complex situation in which the Syrian regime became extremely vulnerable to the dangers of identity politics. These vulnerabilities were attributed to at least three factors.

First of all, there was the politically and historically troubling fact that the Syrian regime was an Alawite regime ruling a country that was predominantly Sunni. During the reign of Hafez al-Assad, this issue threatened the legitimacy of the regime when the

¹⁵⁶ M. Ma'oz. (2007). "The Shi' Crescent: Myth and reality." *The Saban Center for Middle East Policy*, no.15, p. 18.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

Muslim Brotherhood led a rebellion against him in the cities of Homs and Hama. Despite the brutality with which the rebellion was finally crushed, Hafez al-Assad remained cautious in building and maintaining his legitimacy with the Sunni community in his country.¹⁵⁸ This was achieved through political maneuvering by including influential Sunni figures in his cabinets and close circle, and through economic participation by accommodating the merchants the Sunni bourgeoisies of the major cities. At the same time, the policies of the state focused on providing satisfactory welfare services to the Sunni communities in the rural areas.¹⁵⁹

By the time Bashar al-Assad had assumed power, however, he did away with most of the leading Sunni figures in the old guard and had them replaced with close family members and kin. Moreover, access to major economic resources through liberalization and privatization was subject to nepotism, favoring close kin from the Alawite sect. Although Assad's wife was a Sunni from Homs, the fact was by the time Assad had established himself firmly in power, much of his support from Sunni merchants and bourgeoisie had deteriorated.¹⁶⁰ With the weakening of the state and the failure of economic reforms and policies, support among rural Sunni communities was also hit very hard, and hundreds of thousands of unemployed Sunni farmers migrated from the rural areas to the outskirts of the cities during the disastrous drought between 2006 and 2010. With no sources of income or job prospects, these migrants held a grudge against the regime, partly because of the failure of economic and social policies, and partly as they

¹⁵⁸ Pierett (2014).

¹⁵⁹ Sarihan, 2012, pp.70-71.

¹⁶⁰ Slavin, 2005, p.A.14; Zisser, 2007, pp.140-144.

perceived the regime to be favoring the Alawites and other minorities while excluding the Sunnis.¹⁶¹

Growing disenfranchisement among the Sunni community, however, did not represent an immediate threat to a regime that reigned with the aid of numerous security and intelligence apparatuses and a notorious reputation for crushing any potential source of opposition. However, this growing opposition created a fertile ground the growth of acute internal political and communal divisions along the lines of identity politics.¹⁶²

Secondly, between 2000 and 2010, Bashar al-Assad adopted a policy of containment and accommodation toward religious conservatism. He encouraged the expansion of religious associations in the hope of boosting his legitimacy among the Sunnis and in the hope of permitting the growth of various Islamic movement that rivalled the Muslim Brotherhood. While such a tactic was intended to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from gaining ground among the Sunni community, it was also a dangerous move regardless of how well the state thought it could control these religious associations, in particular as religious associations can easily be exposed to cross-national influences.¹⁶³ Moreover, even if these religious associations were intended to be loyal to the regime, the basis of their loyalty was challenged since their followers received few or no benefit and generally felt excluded and disenfranchised by the regime. The successful and impressive rise of a powerful Sunni leader, Recep Erdogan, also cast its shadows on the Syrian political and sectarian map, especially after Erdogan positioned himself as a hard defender of the Palestinian cause. While this positioning meant that Erdogan was in the same line with the

¹⁶¹ Friedman, 2014, p. A21.

¹⁶² Pierret, 2014.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

official Syrian policy toward Israel, the fact is that he represented a very serious threat because he was openly Sunni, openly associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and a rival with the Alawite regime with respect to populist positions and attitudes toward Israel. Until 2010, however, the Turkish role model did not represent a threat simply because Turkey and Syria enjoyed warm relations.¹⁶⁴

The third factor related to the strategy of wearing the US military down in Iraq by welcoming Iraqi opposition leaders and accommodating radical Sunni factions who fought the American presence in Iraq. The original purpose of this policy was to make the US presence in Iraq as uncomfortable as possible. A secondary goal was to enhance the legitimacy of Assad's regime in the eyes of Sunni Syrians who strongly sympathized with their brethren in Iraq. However, this policy was also fraught with dangerous risks. Many of these radical fighters had extended connections and ties in Syria, whether through tribal or other links. Moreover, as Syria allowed radicals to cross its borders, it attracted many Sunni radicals from different countries in the region who were interested in fighting American troops in Iraq.¹⁶⁵ It is very likely that hundreds or even thousands of Syrians were either influenced or indoctrinated by these radical groups and individuals. These individuals and groups did not pose a threat to the regime as long as each benefited from the other. However, this mutual benefit ended by 2008 when the Syrian regime finally started to control the movement of insurgents across its borders, partly because the US was exiting Iraq, and partly at the request of Iran and the pro-Iran regime in Baghdad.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ C. Phillips, (2012). "Into the quagmire: Turkey's frustrated Syria policy." *Chatham House Briefing Paper*, p. 2.

¹⁶⁵ Haddad (2014).

¹⁶⁶ Salem, 2008, p.18.

Once the Arab Spring erupted, its manifestations in Syria were very limited, and identity politics did not even constitute a relevant dimension although the first protests were in Sunni-dominated areas that were characterized as highly neglected and hardest hit by the failure of economic reforms and social policies of the regime. However, once the Islamic factor, specifically through the Muslim Brotherhood, started to gain prominence in Tunisia and Egypt, and later on Libya, all the vulnerabilities of the Syrian regime immediately transformed into real threats.¹⁶⁷

On the regional level, the Arab Spring coincided with the peak of the sectarian confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran over critical issues such as Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Bahrain and Iran's nuclear issue. Both regional powers were engaged in a serious struggle over dominance and turf, using identity politics and sectarianism as means to mobilize and radicalize supporters. The Syrian regime was the weakest link in this chain of events, not only because of its nature as a minority regime governing a predominantly Sunni population,¹⁶⁸ but also because this coincided with years of failed economic and social policies that left the majority of the Sunni population in Syria disenfranchised. In addition to this, the Syrian regime had underestimated the dangers of positioning itself amidst a Shiite axis opposing the Sunni powers in the region. The Arab Spring quickly took on an Islamic dimension of its own and it was only a matter of time before this spilled over into Syria.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ C. Simpson. (Winter 2011). "Assessing the Arab Spring in Libya and Syria: A compilation of varying statements from key actors." *The Quarterly Journal*, v.11, no.1, pp.55-56.

¹⁶⁸ A. Buchs. (2009). "The resilience of authoritarian rule in Syria under Hafez and Bashar al-Asad." *Institute of Middle East Studies*, no.97, p.28.

¹⁶⁹ Phillips, 2011.

In addition to this, the failure of the Syrian regime to respond to the popular demands of the popular risings and the rapid resort to brutal repression further complicated the sectarian context and opened the gates wide for the entry of identity politics. The images and videos of the regime's brutality against the unarmed civilians inflamed both the Syrian and the Arab streets, not only of the wave of popular support that the Arab Spring was enjoying, but also specifically because of the identification with an oppressed Sunni majority at the hands of a repressive minority regime. In no time, the positioning of the Syrian regime as the defender of the Palestinian people and the guardian of Arab nationalism diminished and disappeared as this positioning could not stand the winds of identity politics and sectarianism.¹⁷⁰

For a minority-based regime such as the Syrian regime, a regional confrontation based on identity politics was impossible to overcome. As the confrontation in the Middle East shifted to identity-based politics, the region became divided into two camps, a Sunni and a Shiite camp, and Syria was caught straight in the middle.¹⁷¹ To the north, Turkey's neutrality was lost as Erdogan adopted an openly supportive policy of advocating the oppressed Sunni majority as a means to make a return into Middle Eastern politics. To the South, Jordan had become a hostile neighbor, especially since it was the Jordanian monarch who coined the term "the Shiite crescent" that determined the fault lines of the identity politics of the confrontation.¹⁷² To the west, Lebanon was a controversial territory, divided along the same lines of identity politics. Moreover, even Hamas, Syria's most important

¹⁷⁰ S. Mann. (Feb 9, 2012). "How the Arab League turned against Syria." *Open Democracy*, online.

¹⁷¹ Haddad, 2014.

¹⁷² M. Ma'oz. (2007). "The Shi' Crescent: Myth and reality." *The Saban Center for Middle East Policy*, no.15, p. 18.

ally in Gaza, was lost as it returned to its Muslim Brotherhood roots and abandoned its alliance with Syria. Worst of all, Syria's biggest weakness was to the east in Iraq where the Syrian regime had previously supported the Sunni radicals in the hope of harassing the Americans, indirectly enabling them to build supply lines and support networks, and to develop recruiting and mobilization capabilities between the Sunni triangle in Iraq and all the way into the northeastern and southeastern Syrian territories.¹⁷³ The strategic relevance of this geographic reality and the connection between the neglected Sunni regions and the dense disenfranchised Sunni areas in Iraq and Syria is depicted in the two maps below:

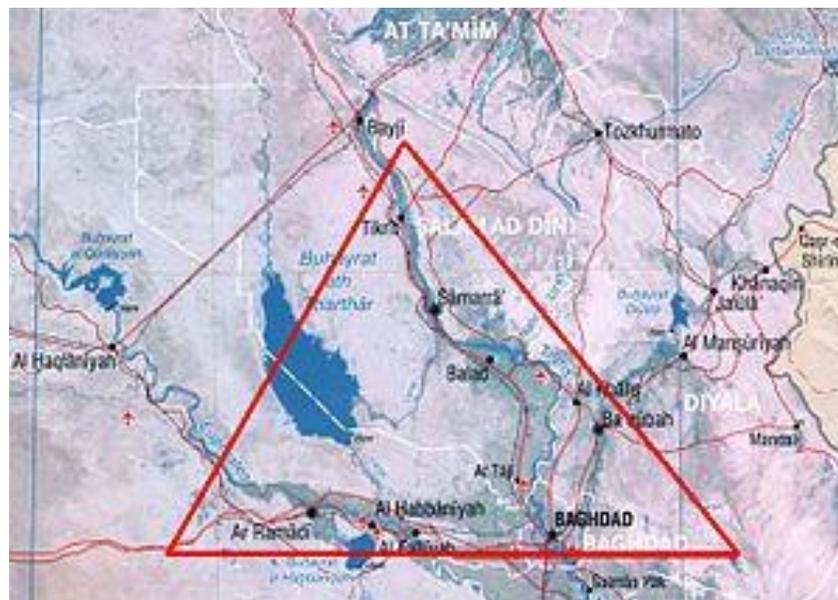


Figure 1. Map of the Sunni Triangle in Iraq

¹⁷³ Haddad, 2014.

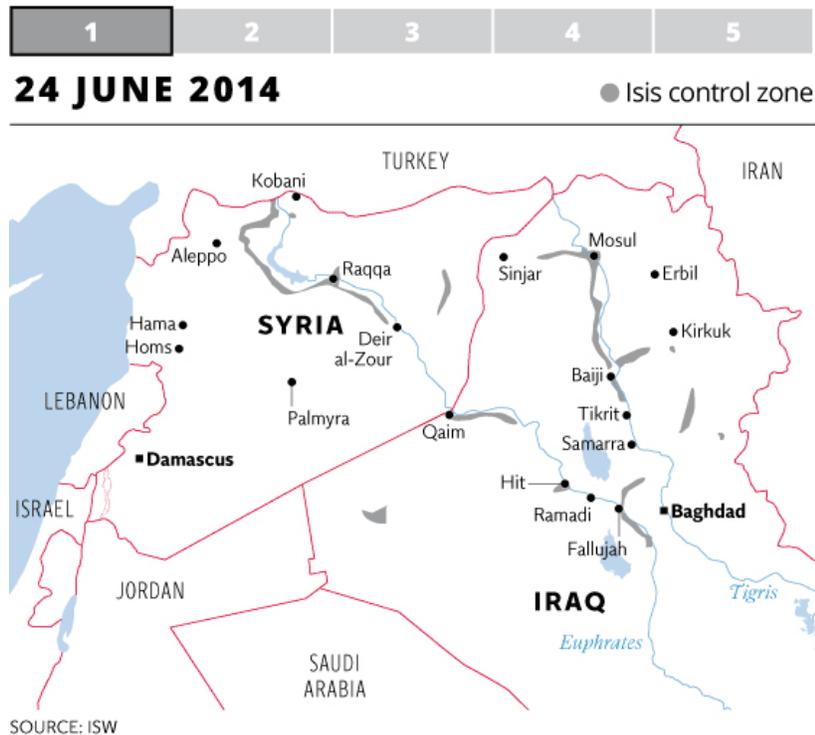


Figure 2. Map of Syria & Iraq Revealing the ISIS Control Zone in June 2014

The above maps illustrate the geographic extension of the power vacuum. Inside Iraq, the Sunni triangle extends from the city of Mosul to the city of Fallujah and all the way to the Saudi-Jordanian border. This triangle intersects with the Syrian northeastern and southeastern borders and the territories adjacent to it, namely Raqqa, Hasaka, Deyr-el-Zor and Palmyra. These areas have predominantly Sunni populations and were to a great extent ignored and neglected for most of Bashar al-Assad’s presidency, and specifically during the period of the severe drought in the last four to five years before the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. Moreover, these were also the areas that suffered a visible collapse of their socioeconomic fabric, especially to the northeastern territories between Turkey and Iraq.

4.5 Dynamics of Crisis & the Role of the LAS

As a non-state actor, the Islamic State in Syria was quite successful in taking advantage of the power vacuum created by state fragmentation and failure, tensions and divisions along identity politics, and the disenfranchisement of the local sectarian communities and populations in the eastern regions of the country. In addition to this, the Islamic State was also able to capitalize on the opportunities available through the access to a strategic depth in the Iraqi Sunni triangle and in Turkey. However, the success of the Islamic State cannot be explained without a closer examination of the failure of the regional system represented by the League of Arab States.¹⁷⁴

Although the League of Arab States (LAS) had not been effective or successful in resolving many of the inter-Arab conflicts since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, it had at least remained a potential vehicle for aligning a minimum level of agreement or understanding among the conflicting interests of various Arab States. The regular summits held by LAS at the levels of state heads and various ministerial levels were also another means of communication whenever necessary.¹⁷⁵

The effectiveness of LAS, however, had been severely compromised in the decade that preceded the onset of the Syrian crisis, first through the disagreement between Syria and the GCC countries over the Arab Peace Initiative to end the Arab-Israeli conflict sponsored by Saudi Arabia, then over the American invasion of Iraq, and finally over the open conflict between the GCC countries and Syria following the assassination of

¹⁷⁴ M. Broning. (2014). "The end of the Arab League?" *Foreign Affairs*.

¹⁷⁵ M. Kucukkeles. (2012). "Arab League's Syrian policy." *SETA Brief*.

Lebanon's former prime minister, Rafic Hariri. This regional polarization in particular, had a debilitating impact on the ability of LAS to align the interests of the Arab states together. The loudest expression of failure was during the events of the Arab Spring when divisions among its members turned it into a secondary actor that merely approved international military intervention in Libya early in 2011. The involvement of LAS in Syria followed just a few months later as violence started to escalate.¹⁷⁶

The intervention by LAS in Syria reflected the extent to which this intergovernmental regional organization had become paralyzed by the internal divisions of its member states and by the acute conflict of their regional interests and positions. The League was able to negotiate an agreement with the Syrian government to withdraw troops from areas witnessing violence with the local communities, but on the ground, its effort was limited to sending 67 observers to monitor compliance. The mission which was dispatched in December 2015, however, a series of failures that reflected the nature of the conflicts that undermined its ability to play an effective role in resolving the crisis.¹⁷⁷

Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries withdrew from the observer mission just a month after the mission had been dispatched. Officially, this withdrawal was justified by the bias of the head of the mission in favor of the Syrian regime, and by the fact that the mission was ineffective. However, this only manifested the fact that the Syrian crisis had already become a central stage for the regional conflict between the GCC countries on the one hand, and the Arab states supporting Syria and Iran on the other. By the end of January

¹⁷⁶ Broning, 2014.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

2012, the mission was ended without any progress, claiming its inability to carry out its function amidst the escalating violence.¹⁷⁸

The entire observer mission dispatched by LAS to Syria barely lasted for two months, virtually having no impact on the escalation of violence or in creating any opportunities for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Still, this short-lived involvement may have played an important role in paving the road for the emergence of ISIS.¹⁷⁹

To start with, the humble effort of LAS and the inept nature and role of the observer mission were indicators of the extent to which the Arab regional order had deteriorated, even to the point that it was no longer able to assume a significant role in addressing the most critical challenges and threats facing this regional order. Secondly, it may have also reflected the fact that LAS itself was no longer a vehicle through which Arab states could communicate and resolve their issues. Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries, for example, did not hesitate to withdraw from the mission and to express their dissatisfaction with its outcomes, hinting their interest in a clear and explicit condemnation of the Syrian regime. Thus, regardless of how weak and inadequate the League of Arab States had become by 2011, the withdrawal of the LAS mission from Syria was in effect an implicit announcement that the traditional regional order represented by LAS was no longer relevant to the Syrian crisis.¹⁸⁰

Despite the ailing nature and role of LAS, its withdrawal from the Syrian crisis had a number of serious consequences which in the following two years contributed to setting

¹⁷⁸ Kucukelles, 2012.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

the ground for the rise of the Islamic State in Syria. First, without the LAS traditional inhibitions on interference in the domestic affairs of other Arab states, the withdrawal signified that the Syrian crisis was open for all kinds of regional interferences. Secondly, the withdrawal of LAS also implied that the Arab regional order in its classical form had come to an end, inviting non-Arab actors to be involved in the crisis, specifically Iran and Turkey. On the ground, the collapse of the traditional Arab order transformed the Syrian crisis into an open conflict and a battlefield where regional and international powers did not hesitate to channel financial, military and political support, either to the Syrian state or to the numerous non-state groups that opposed the regime.¹⁸¹

The removal of the so-called umbrella that was represented by LAS and the regional order that it once symbolized, meant that Syrian territories had become the battleground of choice for any regional or even international powers that wanted to settle accounts by proxy war. For example, it was within the context of the Saudi-Qatari competition to dominate Arab politics after the Arab Spring that both countries channeled billions of dollars in financial and military aid to radical Islamic groups budding within the Syrian conflict. While these groups shared their animosity against the Syrian regime, they did not hesitate to go to war against each other at the same time. Turkey, too, attempted to take advantage of its shared border with Syria and offered both material and logistic support to emerging rising groups opposing the Syrian regime, regardless of their nature or political agendas.

The rise of the Islamic State in Syria, therefore, is an opportunistic success to make the best out of available resources and prevailing circumstances, specifically the failed

¹⁸¹ Broning, 2014.

state, radical politics of identity amidst severe political and sectarian regional conflicts, and the formation of a power vacuum following the collapse of the Arab regional order represented by the League of Arab States and the regional unbalances that ensued.

4.6 The Rise of the Islamic State

The series of exceptional events which occurred simultaneously in Syria created the perfect grounds for the emergence of ISIS. From a historic context, the rise of ISIS in Syria was sudden and fast as it occurred in a very short period of time, but it was not very surprising when considering the opportunistic nature of the organization and the culmination of events. In fact, this adequate environment did not emerge out of nowhere. In the decade preceding the Arab Spring, factors forming this environment were already in motion.

Upon the eruption of the Syrian unrest in 2011 and until 2013, ISIS was involved in a futile effort to establish itself within the Syrian conflict, and its failure was attributed to several facts. Unlike the moderate opposition factions in Syria that, despite being unable to contain divisions within their ranks, shared the common objective of toppling the Assad's regime, the Islamic State had little or no interest in changing the regime as its main concern was to control territory and establish the Islamic caliphate under the leadership of al-Baghdadi. Besides, ISIS could not maintain an alliance with al-Qaeda, the organization from which it originally emerged, and this became evident when al-Qaeda denounced the Islamic State in February 2014 and announced that it had no connections to it. Ideologically, al-Qaeda and ISIS are the same. However, ISIS shows signs of conflict with Al-Qaeda over leadership, decision making, and strategy. ISIS can be considered as a more

radical and far more globalized form of al-Qaeda which refused nevertheless to follow the traditional methods of al-Qaeda and which relied on absolute and radical violence and intimidation to achieve its goals, especially the establishment of an Islamic State or Caliphate. In contrast, al-Qaeda did not want to go this far, and its goals in Syria and Iraq were mainly limited to fighting American occupation and toppling regimes such as al-Assad's regime. Hence, al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, Jabhat al-Nusra, became less radical compared to ISIS, as it tried to win over the moderate Syrian opposition groups against ISIS. This was therefore followed by intense fighting in Syria between the Islamic State on the one hand, and the various secular and Islamic opposition factions including Jabhat al-Nusra, on the other. They were basically successful in defeating ISIS in 2013, but in 2014, ISIS returned much stronger than ever, especially after the successful invasion of Mosul, and the success of ISIS in using available resources and social media platforms to promote its cause and recruit thousands of new fighters.

The blitz attack on Mosul and west Iraq enabled ISIS to acquire massive military capabilities and to win over the support of many Sunni Arab tribes as well as foreign recruits within a short period of time. As a result, ISIS enjoyed rapid material support from its Iraqi branch, which enabled it to orchestrate its sudden and successful expansion in eastern and north eastern Syria in May and June 2014.¹⁸² In September 2014, estimates indicate that the Islamic State had as many as 31,000 fighters¹⁸³ out of whom two-thirds were located in Syria mainly in Aleppo, Al-Raqqa, Dayr El-Zour and Hasaka¹⁸⁴. Around 8

¹⁸² K. Rekawek. (2015). "The rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the new Sunni revolution." *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, v.24, no.3, pp. 122-123.

¹⁸³ "What Is 'Islamic State'?" BBC News. 5 Dec. 2015.

¹⁸⁴ C. Blanchard, Carla H., and Mary Beth N. (Sept. 17, 2014). "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response." Congressional Research Services. p.13

million people were believed to be living under the partial or full control of the Islamic State in a huge territory that could reach 90,000 km² connecting Syria to Iraq.¹⁸⁵ Reports also suggest that the assets and wealth of the Islamic state reached USD2 billion in 2014 initially received from sponsors and seized oilfields placing it among the wealthiest armed opposition factions in Syria.¹⁸⁶

While the radical nature of several of the opposition groups in Syria was very evident, the regional sponsors of these groups were more concerned with their ability to undermine or defeat the Assad regime. It was within this context that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged as a splinter al-Qaeda group, enjoying a clear competitive advantage over its rivals as a result of the previous experience that many of its hardened fighters had acquired in Iraq, and the high degree of organizational discipline imposed by its senior officers, many of whom were trained by former military officers in Saddam Hussein's army.

With its superior organizational capabilities and organizational discipline, as well as its opportunistic nature and hardened experience in the battlefield, it is not surprising that ISIS was far more successful than any other opposition groups in Syria to make the best out of the flowing financial and military aid from various sponsors. It is most likely that these sponsors strongly believed that they could maintain a significant degree of control over the radical groups that they financed and supported, and possibly never expected that one of these groups would attempt to achieve full financial and economic independence in the pursuit of its own agenda. This is reminiscent of how the United States,

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ "What Is 'Islamic State'?" BBC News. 5 Dec. 2015.

Saudi Arabia and other countries financially and militarily supported al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the 1980s as partners in a proxy war against the Soviet Union, and where eventually the non-state actor pursued its own interests, even if this meant effectively turning against the governments that sponsored it.

Syria offered ISIS a strategic spot where all key factors collided. The Islamic State in Syria was not only more successful in capitalizing on its exceptional organizational discipline by establishing a quasi-state and claiming the Caliphate in 2014, acquiring support from various sponsors, and utilizing its resources effectively to maximize control over land and populations amidst regional failing balances, but it also utilized the sectarian card in the best possible way to garner support from disenfranchised local Sunni populations in Syria and from sympathizers among Sunni Muslims all over the world. It presented itself as a powerful non-state actor against a failing state and a dysfunctional regional order, and successfully exploited the chaos that sectarian divisions and conflicts, as well as the power vacuum that prevailed in the eastern areas of Syria, have brought in the wake of eruption of the Arab uprising.

The Islamic State was therefore able to capitalize on the opportunities that became available to it as a result of the changing domestic and regional landscapes in Syria by that time, specifically the weakness of the Syrian state, shifts in regional balances of power, the emergence of identity politics, and the development of a power vacuum.

The weakness of the Syrian State

First, there was the consistent but accelerated state weakness in Syria which reached the point of failure, especially in the rural areas dominated by Sunni populations where it

failed to carry out its economic, political and social reforms. In fact, the state had become incompetent to the point that most Sunni-populated rural areas suffered the disintegration of their socioeconomic fabric, forcing thousands of young, unemployed and disenfranchised individuals to move to the cities where they constituted poverty belts surrounding the cities. This also coincided with the worst drought in Syria's modern history, which further paralyzed the weak state and prevented it from taking any effective measures to prevent such a catastrophic event.¹⁸⁷ ISIS was simply able to consolidate its rule in seized territories and created a system of Islamic governance. It present itself as an alternative to the Syrian state which was virtually no longer legitimate in the eyes of most of its Sunni constituents and the various opposition groups. With its resources and organizational capabilities which contrasted sharply with the lack of organization among other opposition movements, ISIS was able to promote itself as a reliable authority which catered to the needs of local populations through building institutions and providing vital services, despite its evident reliance on terror and violence.¹⁸⁸

Shifts in the Regional Balances of Power

Secondly, there were the rapid and radical shifts in regional balances of power and disruptions in the regional order affecting the various delicate balances of power on which Syria depended on to maintain its security. This situation forced the Syrian regime to position itself firmly within an alliance with Iran and Hezbollah to achieve a balance of power vis-à-vis Israel and the US as well as Arab rivals. For the first time, Syria was squarely at odds with all the major Arab powers, specifically those characterized by Islamic

¹⁸⁷ Friedman, 2014; Greenstock, 2013.

¹⁸⁸ Rekawek, 2015, p. 126.

conservatism, and at a time when Arab nationalism had almost completely lost its relevance and its ability to provide legitimacy to regimes, particularly with the collapse of major republican regimes that endorsed Arab nationalism during the Arab Spring.¹⁸⁹ Once the regional conflict shifted to identity politics based on sectarianism, this shift undermined the internal legitimacy of the Syrian regime and contributed to turning the marginalized Syrian Sunnis against it. ISIS was thus successful in playing along the regional rifts and divisions, specifically as it benefited from the fact that every one of the major players in the region feared its neighbors more than it feared ISIS.¹⁹⁰ Major players including Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Syrian regime were entangled in a complex regional confrontation and competition which created a power vacuum in which ISIS was able to avoid confrontation with these major powers and at the same time to establish itself and benefit from their divisions and conflicts along sectarian lines.¹⁹¹

The Emergence of Identity Politics

Thirdly, the power transitions that emerged as a result of the American invasion of Iraq and the disruption of the regional order unwittingly placed Syria in the middle of a Shiite alliance. Although the sectarian dimension of this alliance was mitigated and minimized as the alliance also included Hamas and boosted its legitimacy from its successful confrontation with Israel, this positioning was no match to the power of identity politics sweeping through the region. Both Iran and the conservative Islamic monarchies in the Gulf fueled the sectarian dimension of identity politics to boost domestic legitimacy

¹⁸⁹ Mann, 2012.

¹⁹⁰ Zunes, 2016, p. 20.

¹⁹¹ Trofimov, Y. & Shishkin, P. (Oct 17, 2015). "Clashing agendas fuel rise of Islamic state: Regional rivalries in Middle East trump fighting extremist group." *Wall Street Journal*, p. A1.

and enhance regional influence. However, Syria was the weakest link in this chain of events since its predominantly Sunni population was ruled by an Alawite minority.¹⁹² It only took a short while after the unrest in Syria started, and before the confrontation transformed from a people-versus-regime to a Sunni-versus-Alawite confrontation. For ISIS, the explicit use of sectarian identities and the success of Islamic movements around the region was a perfect opportunity to position itself as the leader of the disenfranchised Sunnis in Syria, coopting the tribes and offering them stability amidst chaos, as well as protection from the risks and threats of sectarian violence.¹⁹³

Power Vacuum

The Syrian regime unwittingly created a power vacuum in its northeastern and southeastern territories and through the Sunni triangle in Iraq, in part through state weakness and failure in maintaining the Sunni communities there, and in part through providing support to Sunni radicals fighting the US troops in Iraq between 2003 and 2008.¹⁹⁴ Although the Syrian regime finally ended this support in 2009 and 2010, the presence of the Syrian state in that area was no longer tangible, and likewise, the Iraqi state had almost no presence in the adjacent area extending through the Sunni Triangle in Iraq. This stateless territorial region which covers a strategic stretch of almost 700,000 km, an area bigger than France, bordered Iran to the east, the Mediterranean to the west, Jordan and Saudi Arabia to the south, and the Kurdistan and Turkey to the north. The massive territory that was out of the control of any state was exposed to the growing power of Sunni radicals who at one time enjoyed the support of the Syrian regime in waging their attacks

¹⁹² Buchs, 2009, p.28.

¹⁹³ Panayiotides, 2015, pp. 16-17.

¹⁹⁴ Friedman, 2014; Haddad, 2014; Gause, 2013.

against American troops. Once the regional confrontation shifted to sectarian-based politics and transformed into a regional conflict on the basis of identity politics, this region represented a political vacuum of an extreme strategic importance to ISIS. In the provinces under the control of ISIS, the authority of all states and organizations becomes null by “the expansion of the caliph's authority and the arrival of its troops to their areas”.¹⁹⁵ In this area, orders and laws are replaced by an Islamic model of governance. None of the major immediate actors, namely Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Jordan or Saudi Arabia had the ability to make a direct military move to control this area.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵J. Hall. (2014). *"The ISIS Map of the World: Militants Outline Chilling Five-year Plan for Global Domination as They Declare Formation of Caliphate - and Change Their Name to the Islamic State."* Mail Online.

¹⁹⁶ Maslin, 2015; Remnick, 2015.

Chapter Five

Discussion & Conclusion

5.1 A Perfect Storm?

The purpose of this case study is to identify the factors that contributed to the emergence of the Islamic State as a phenomenon in Syria, specifically state weakness or failure, identity politics, shift in the balances of power, and power vacuums in the Middle East. It must be noted, however, that the sudden and rapid rise of ISIS, first in Iraq and subsequently in Syria has been subject to numerous speculations. These speculations and theories have accused multiple sides of creating and manipulating ISIS for political purposes including the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and multiple others. This paper is not concerned with the assessment of these speculations or with identifying the masterminds behind ISIS. Rather, the main concern of this study is to identify and explain the factors that facilitated the creation of ISIS and its rapid rise in Syria. After all, without substantial support from the local communities in Syria, ISIS could not have possibly achieved the military and political success that it enjoyed within a relatively short period of time.

The main assumptions of this paper are that the factors contributing to the creation, rise and success of the Islamic State in Syria were the weakness, fragmentation and failure of the state, the rise of identity politics, and the interplay between the rapid shifts in balances of power and the development of unbalances and power vacuums. All these factors coincided and intertwined to form a perfect storm that swept through wide regions of Syria, resulting in the creation of the Islamic State in Syria as an extension to the Islamic

State in Iraq. Additionally, these factors did not emerge or develop overnight, but rather over long periods of time as this chapter shows. Hence, it is very unlikely that ISIS was an artificial entity that was fabricated and imposed in a certain geopolitical context in as much as it was the result, outcome and effect of several overlapping causes that had been evolving for years.

5.2 Assessment of Contributing Factors

One of the major assumptions of this case study is that a number of critical factors contributed to the formation and emergence of ISIS in Syria. The contribution of each of these critical factors is evaluated individually, with the assumption that none of them alone could have explained the rise of ISIS in the manner that it did in 2014.

State Weakness & Failure

The findings strongly suggest that the Syrian state had been struggling for many years with structural and inherent weaknesses. However, at least until the end of the 1990s, the state was still able to maintain a strong degree of reliability in terms of providing the basic public goods and services essential to restore social and political stability. For example, during the 1980s and 1990s, the regime was successful in maintaining a degree of balance in terms of allocating resources, sharing rents and economic benefits, and buying in the loyalty of various relevant constituents by providing access to economic resources managed, controlled, or supervised by the state. The welfare state, therefore, was an essential component of maintaining loyalty and regime legitimacy.

This welfare state, however, suffered a severe blow in the decade after Bashar Al-Assad took over. One factor was the frustration that resulted from the high expectations

that were associated with his promised and highly publicized reforms. Locally, however, the implication of these failed reforms had more to do with the diminishing welfare role of the state. Economic liberalization programs that were pursued between 2000 and 2005 were instrumental in undermining the ability of the state to provide welfare services. To the contrary, those economic reforms proved to be counterproductive as they disenfranchised many of the constituents that were traditionally supportive of the regime.

While state weakness and the failed economic reforms increased the vulnerabilities of the regime, they did not in any way contribute to civil unrest or to an open or publicized challenge to the regime or its legitimacy. However, three critical developments must be addressed with respect to state weakness during the period between 2005 and 2010.

First of all, state weakness quickly transformed to almost completely state failure in a number of peripheral regions, especially the northeastern and eastern regions where the socioeconomic fabric of communities there was destroyed as a result of the severe drought and the inability of the state to provide the most basic level of public services. As a result, thousands of families in those regions were reduced to absolute poverty and forced to migrate to the cities, forming poverty belts. In the cities, those thousands of migrants are unlikely to have found better living standards or sources of stable and reliable income. On its own, this devastating development could have created critical concerns with respect to social stability and security, as thousands of young men were left with no prospects for a better life. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the factions that eventually fought the regime after 2012 were recruited from these communities. The state failure in these peripheral regions was therefore instrumental in undermining the loyalty of those communities to the regime, especially as the presence of the state there was barely tangible

with the disintegration of the socioeconomic fabric of those regions. Still, there is no evidence whatsoever indicating any form of unrest against the regime manifested by these devastated communities, whether in their local regions or in the new cities where they attempted to settle as a result of their migration. Hence, despite the deteriorating state presence and eventual state failure in the peripheral areas over a period of at least five years, there was still no visible challenge to the legitimacy of the state in those areas.

Secondly, the assessment of the impact of the drought and the failure of state policies in the peripheral areas strongly highlights the fact that the regions that were hit the hardest were those in the northeast, east and southeast, specifically Raqqa, Hasaka and Deyr el-Zour. In contrast, other regions continued to attain economic growth and to maintain socioeconomic stability. This indicates that the state was able to allocate resources to those regions and to maintain their wellbeing. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the legitimacy of the state diminished in the devastated regions while it remained intact in other regions that still continued to survive as a result of state involvement, the continued provision of public goods and welfare policies.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it is worth noting that the regions that were hit the hardest by state weakness and failure as a result of the reforms and later on the drought were all predominantly Sunni. In contrast, the regions that continued to enjoy a relative degree of economic and social stability were those characterized by Alawite populations and other minorities. There is no evidence indicating that the discrepancy in economic performance and social stability of various regions was the source of any political or social unrest in the country prior to the events of the Arab Spring. However, it

is very unlikely that such a reality was not known to various community leaders, especially when relevant data were made public on a number of occasions.

Overall, however, despite the bleak economic realities, the persistent state weakness and the eventual disintegration of state policies in various geographic regions, no serious unrest or challenge to the state or the regime was ever noted before the eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011. It is noteworthy, however, that when ISIS proclaimed itself as an Islamic state, its territories specifically included those regions that had been devastated by state failure and the failure of state policies and reforms between 2000 and 2010.

The Critical Relevance of Identity Politics

Although state weakness and state failure are often among the factors that attract or encourage various types of insurgencies, upheavals and political instabilities, this may not have been a sufficient factor in the case of Syria for several reasons.

First of all, while state weakness intensified and exceeded the point of failure by the late 2000s, hundreds of thousands simply left their towns, villages and lands, seeking hope for better opportunities in the metropolitan areas even when opportunities for jobs and income were very limited.

Secondly, although the popular uprisings started in Syria in March 2011, especially in the cities and metropolitan areas around which thousands of migrants had settled in poverty belts, the major demands of the popular movements in the initial period were limited to reforms, but not regime change. This implies that the legitimacy of the regime was still maintained in the eyes of the population, even among the most disenfranchised. It

was not until a later stage in the uprisings that demonstrators started demanding regime change and resorting to violence.

Thirdly, despite the evident state failure in several peripheral regions in Syria, state failure was possibly perceived only with respect to the failure of the state to provide basic public goods and welfare benefits. The state instruments of repression and regime control such as the multiple intelligence and secret police services, on the other hand, remained as intact as ever, and this was probably an important factor that discouraged any manifestation of any signs of challenge to the regime despite state failure.

Based on these three factors, it can be argued that state failure in the peripheral regions and the difficulties facing the state following the failure of economic reforms in the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's presidency did not constitute a sufficient cause to turn the population against him, not even the disenfranchised Sunnis. This is not surprising given the resilience of the Syrian regime and the perceived capability of the regime to repress and overcome any form of challenge to its internal legitimacy. Such perceptions did not only exist among the Syrian opposition inside Syria, but also among external and foreign observers, which probably explains why Arab and international media did not pay much attention to the demonstrations against the Syrian regime at the onset of these demonstrations.

The uprisings in Syria remained generally peaceful for at least four months and the earliest signs of resorting to violence by the insurgents started later in July 2011. It is typically argued by the Syrian opposition and by sympathetic observers that the insurgencies only started after the regime had gone too far in applying repressive and

violent means in attempting to suppress the uprisings. However, there is no evidence to support such a claim, especially when taking into consideration the well-publicized history of the Syrian regime in using extremely violent means to suppress any uprisings or insurgencies.

On the other hand, by the summer of 2011, it had become evident that the uprisings in Syria were gaining moral support as they were linked to the dynamics of the Arab Spring. This was also followed by the failing initiative of the LAS in November to mediate for a peaceful solution between the regime and the insurgents. During this critical period, several important developments took place that changed the dynamics of the Syrian uprisings and linked them directly to the broader regional upheaval and invoking the complexities of identity politics into these uprisings. One of these developments was the growing popular support in the Arab street for the uprisings in Syria, a factor which probably provided a moral boost for the opposition. The second factor was the collapse of the Syrian regime's relationship with a number of supportive states including Turkey, Jordan and Qatar. The collapse in the relationships with Qatar and Turkey was particularly significant because the former was accused of providing moral, political, financial and material support to the upheavals of the Arab Spring; the latter, on the other hand, was a neighboring major power with an openly Sunni character and bordering the most disenfranchised Sunni regions of Syria.

Another development during this period was the rise in regional tensions between Iran on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries on the other. This only added to the tensions in Bahrain and the fact that Iran was attempting to capitalize on the

Arab Spring by branding it as a new change that was similar to the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The outcome of these developments that took place on the regional level resulted in the sectarian inflammation of the region at a time when the Arab Spring was taking on a clear Sunni Islamist identity, especially with the gains attained by the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. It is worth mentioning that the Muslim Brotherhood also enjoyed major regional sponsors, namely Turkey and Qatar. Even more relevant is the fact that the historic leading Syrian faction that opposed the Assad regime was the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria.

Hence, within just a few months, the timing of the uprising in Syria, the sudden regional developments that witnessed the rapid emergence of the Sunni activist factor, and the positioning of Syria at the heart of a Shiite-dominated alliance meant that the Syrian uprisings had to acquire a sectarian nature. This was inevitable for two specific internal reasons that were specific to the nature of the region. The first was the evident fact that the Syrian regime was a minority regime in which a small Alawite minority that was closely associated with Shiism was in power, governing an oppressed Sunni majority. The second factor was the failure of the regime to diffuse the sectarian dimension when it organized the popular defense militias to crack down on the demonstrators. Since these militias were closely associated with the regime and prominent Alawite figures in it, the fact that an Alawite militia was repressing a Sunni majority demanding freedom in a region that was witnessing an unprecedented Sunni upheaval made the transformation of the Syrian crisis into a sectarian conflict inevitable.

The importance of identity politics, both on the regional and the local level, therefore, is that it contributed to political and social polarization as the popular uprisings there quickly transformed into a sectarian confrontation between a Sunni majority and a regime dominated by an Alawite minority. Despite the escalation of the popular movement to a sectarian confrontation, this still did not create the necessary circumstances for the formation and emergence of ISIS in Syria. That process still lacked another critical factor, namely the formation of a power vacuum that necessitated the emergence of an alternative power to fill the void.

The Creation of Power Vacuum

Since the 1970s, the Assad regime, first under Hafez and later under Bashar, was able to successfully position Syria within regional alliances to secure a balance of power that ensured the survival of the regime. This was vital, not only because of the geopolitical vulnerabilities of Syria, but also because the Assad regime was a minority-dominated regime in a predominantly Sunni region. This is not to mention the limited resources of the Syrian state and the fact that it had to rely on external support to maintain its ability to stay in power.

Although the Arab Spring undermined the prevailing balances of power in early 2011, especially with the toppling of the Mubarak regime that represented a heavyweight player in the Arab order, power shifts and transitions were already underway even long before the onset of the Arab regime. Bashar Assad's positioning of Syria in an alliance with Iran, Iraq, Hezbollah and Hamas was particularly problematic. On the one hand, joining an alliance alongside Iraq was very logical from a strategic point of view since Iraq

had always represented Syria's strategic depth. On the other hand, this was only true when Iraq was a central Arab state that belonged to the club of Sunni Arab states, not as a war-torn and isolated Shiite entity. Secondly, while Syria's alliance with Iran was not new, the new development was Syria's positioning against the traditional Arab axis without a single major Arab ally, a serious weakness that Hafez Assad had always been wary of during his long reign.

Alongside Bashar Assad's strategic alliance, Syria also enjoyed close and intimate relations with Turkey, Qatar and to a lesser extent, Jordan. These relationships, however, did not survive the test of regional shifts and power transitions. Neighboring Jordan was among the first countries in the region to spearhead the sectarian regional confrontation, possibly to enhance the legitimacy of its vulnerable regime. Under Erdogan, Turkey quickly took advantage of the Arab Spring and joined the regional sectarian wave since this represented an opportunity for the Turkish regime to re-enter Arab and Middle Eastern politics. Whether the Turkish and Jordanian shifting positions were driven by opportunism is not clear, but it is clear that the sectarian issue laid heavily on the nature of regional alliances and positions. This was clearly evident when Hamas, Syria's most loyal ally in the region, was forced to support the Arab Spring and the Syrian uprising, while denouncing the Syrian regime and exiting the alliance with Iran and Syria.

This series of rapid and fundamental shifts in regional alliances and positions that occurred during the initial phase of the Arab Spring, the ongoing sectarian confrontation and the dysfunctional Arab regional order represented by the failing attempts of the LAS left Syria with catastrophic geopolitical vulnerabilities coupled with an unanticipated

power vacuum that extended from the Syrian northeast through the Syrian hinterland and all the way into Iraq.

To the north, Syria suddenly found itself facing a hostile Turkish neighbor. Although this was not the first time Syria had found itself facing the hostility of its Turkish neighbor, traditionally the two sides balanced the hostility toward each other as a result of their mutual need to keep the Kurds in check. This time, however, Turkey was able to capitalize on the sectarian card by presenting itself as the supporter and protector of the Sunni majority against the repressive Alawite regime. The threat was not whether Turkey could send Turkish troops into Syria, but rather, that it would provide a strategic depth for any organized non-state actor through its borders to the Sunni-dominated regions in the north and northeast where the state had given up or lost its presence and functioning. The failure of the Syrian state in those regions, coupled with the sectarian dimension, created a power vacuum in a territory populated disenfranchised communities whose socio-economic fabric had been destroyed, and characterized by the absence of state power and control. On top of this, this territory was also adjacent to a neighboring country whose government was sympathetic to the local communities in their opposition to the regime and qualifying as a potential strategic depth to them on the basis of religious and sectarian dimensions.

To the east and southeastern borders, similar developments also took place along the Iraqi border. Ironically, the Syrian regime had contributed to the growth of smuggling routes through this border from the Sunni Syrian towns to the Sunni triangle in Iraq during the Iraqi insurgency when the Syrian regime was providing support to Iraqi insurgents to unsettle the American occupation. By the time the regional alliances had shifted, this sector

of the Syrian border suddenly transformed into a major source of threat for the regime. Although the Syrian regime was allied with the Iraqi regime, under the new reality, the Syrian regime barely had any territorial link to the regime in Bagdad. In contrast, the immediate link was between the territories characterized by a power vacuum in the eastern and southeastern regions of Syria and the Sunni triangle in Iraq. Furthermore, the Iraqi desert offered a smuggling channel from Saudi Arabia directly to Syria, while to the south, Jordan was no longer a friendly neighbor for the regime.

Therefore, a substantial territory extending from the northeastern Syrian border with Turkey, extending along the eastern side with Iraq and all the way southwards to Jordan, was characterized by a visible absence or failure of the central state, a substantial disenfranchised population that was increasingly popularized along the lines of sectarian identity and whose social fabric had been destroyed in light of the regimes' failure to carry out its reforms, policies and economic plans, combined with the presence of a strategic potential for logistic support both to the east in the Sunni triangle in Iraq and to the west into the Turkish territories.

It is not surprising that much of the insurgency that developed against the Syrian regime started in that area. This territory remained in a state of power vacuum as it witnessed ongoing skirmishes between various local secular and Islamic opposition factions that were unable to secure territorial gains or the loyalty of local communities.

5.3 Conclusion

This case study is based on the central assumption that the rise of the Islamic State in Syria was the result of contributing factors that developed within specific social, cultural,

political, economic, and regional contexts. Although the sudden emergence and rise of ISIS is often associated with numerous speculations, this case study tells a different story. The seeds of ISIS had been sown many years ago, and its recent rise was encouraged and motivated by intersecting factors.

These factors include the series of massive economic and political failures by the Syrian regime since 2000, the changing environment of regional politics and balances of power, the sectarian crisis in neighboring Iraq and the shifting strategic alliances to which Syria belonged or confronted.

Internally, it was the failed policies of the Syrian regimes in the rural Sunni areas that created a power vacuum in which neither the Syrian state nor any other state prevailed.

At the same time, the area in which this power vacuum existed constituted not only of a disenfranchised Sunni majority, but one which incidentally found itself enjoying a strategic depth in Iraq to the east and through its desert to the Arab Peninsula to the South, and Turkey to the north, creating favorable conditions for the rise of ISIS. The radical ideology of ISIS is a dangerous expression of identity politics in light of ongoing national and regional confrontations and unbalances based on clashing sectarian identities.

The bloody chapter written by the Islamic State in the modern history of Syria and the region, however, will probably motivate future research initiatives and will raise new questions about how non-state actors are formed and transformed, and how they may successfully and quickly challenge the sovereignty and existence of the modern state and order. Although the Islamic State may be nothing more than anomaly, the evidence in this case strongly suggests that many of the factors that led to the formation of the Islamic State

may be found in many other regions that are troubled by tensions, divisions, identity insecurities, power transitions and fragmented states, especially when external regional or international sponsors are able and willing to interfere to achieve political gains. Another area of interest that is already attracting significant attention from researchers is the ability of a non-state actor such as the Islamic State to mobilize and attract support and recruits from all over the world, even from remote regions.

The Islamic State in Syria is most probably unlikely to survive, whether because it lacks the capacity for a long-term survival or because sooner or later its presence will be challenged and terminated as the balance of powers in the region returns to equilibrium. However, the successful rise of the Islamic State and the manner in which it was able to impose a challenge to the nation state and the Arab regional order remain an open question into the future.

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