The Islamic State in Context:
A Postcolonial Approach to Understanding its Emergence in Iraq and Syria

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Abstract

The Islamic State (IS) is a militant Salafi-jihadist organization that remains adamant about dismantling the Iraqi-Syrian border and restoring an Islamic caliphate. The organization's significant territorial conquests and its brutality, in the form of beheadings, crucifications, and suicide bombings, continues to give rise to predominately Orientalist and cultural essentialist explanations about its origins and nature. These Orientalist discourses emphasize "innate" *cultural* aspects of Muslim-majority communities that created favorable environments for the emergence of IS in the Middle East. My research asserts that an overemphasis on culture, tradition and religion fails to capture the complex and multidimensional nature of both IS and the Middle East. This Master's thesis therefore challenges the broad range of conventional Orientalist and neo-Orientalist arguments about IS, and instead, undertakes a critical historical and postcolonial approach to answer the following question: *why did the political conditions of Iraq after 2003 foster an environment favorable for the rapid and ambitious rise of the Islamic State?* The thesis consults primary and secondary sources, including personal collections, official sources, transcripts and videos, from IS, scholars, observers, and governmental and nongovernmental organizations. It uses critical historical and archival research to locate, interpret, and analyze the rise of IS and the current violence in the Middle East. This is done in the context of the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and its post-invasion policies, the violent suppression of the 2011 uprising in Syria and the transformation of the violence into a full-blown civil/proxy war, and the spread of militant Wahhabism and Salafism, which continues to inform IS' ideological foundation. The findings defy ahistorical and apolitical explanations of IS and reveal the enduring impacts of great power politics in the region, thereby providing a compelling and critical postcolonial analysis of the emergence of IS first in Iraq and then in Syria.

Dedication

My Country, I Will Build You Again

My country, I will build you again,
If need be, with bricks made from my life.
I will build columns to support your roof,
If need be, with my bones.
I will inhale again the perfume of flowers
Favored by your youth.
I will wash again my blood off your body
With torrents of my tears.
Once more, the darkness will leave this house.
I will paint my poems blue with the color of our sky.
The resurrector of "old bones" will grant me in his bounty
a mountains splendor in his testing grounds.
Old I may be, but given the change, I will learn.
I will begin a second youth alongside my progeny.
I will recite the Hadith of love and country
With such fervor as to make each world bear life.
There still burns a fire in my breast
to keep undiminished the warmth of kinship
I feel for my people.
Once more you will grant me strength,
though my poems have settled in blood.
Once more I will build you with my life,
though it be beyond my means.[1]

Simin Behbahani (1927-2014)

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[1] Farzaneh Milani and Kaveh Safa, "Eight Poems by Simin Behbahani," *Iranian Studies: Journal of The International Society For Iranian Studies* 41 (2008): 93

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to a number of individuals who helped me through the process of researching and writing this thesis in a way that does justice to the suppressed indigenous voices of Iraq and Syria.

First and foremost, I thank my supervisor, Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi, for his guidance, expertise and unwavering support, while providing me with the liberty to shape the direction and outcome of my research. I wholeheartedly appreciate his insight and mentorship throughout this process.

I thank Dr. Roger Epp, Dr. Rob Aitken, and Dr. Thomas Keating who, at different stages in my research project, provided me with valuable and constructive feedback about my ideas, drafts, and findings. I am truly indebted to their mentorship and intellectual guidance.

I am also grateful for my family, friends and colleagues, both in Edmonton and elsewhere, with whom I shared many happy and frustrating moments in these past couple of years.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my parents, Ahmed Abdulhamid and Fatma Abubakar, for inspiring me with their courage, dedication and commitment, and for teaching me to place kindness at the center of all my being.

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Introduction

The Islamic State (IS), also referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and by its Arabic language acronym *Daesh* (*ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi 'il-Iraq wa-sh-Sham*), is a violent, fundamentalist Salafi jihadist organization that has made significant territorial advances in both Iraq and Syria over the past couple of years. IS has been adamant about destroying what they deem to be "artificial" borders created by the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, a secret negotiation between British diplomat Sir Mark Sykes and his French equivalent François Georges-Picot that arbitrarily divided the spoils from the Ottoman Empire, thereby establishing British and French spheres of influence in the Middle East.[2] After seizing Mosul in 2014, IS posted pictures of fighters destroying the barriers that marked the Iraqi-Syrian border in an attempt to overturn a "historical injustice." Current IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared that the advance into Mosul "[would] not stop until [they] hit the last nail in the coffin of the Sykes-Picot conspiracy."[3] Al-Baghdadi also claims that the nullification of the "artificial" Iraqi-Syrian border will trigger the end of the modern-state system promulgated by colonial powers after the First World War.

As will be shown in the following pages, Al-Baghdadi's argument is part of a larger Orientalism-in-reverse discourse where IS exploits prevalent ideas and images produced by (neo)Orientalism about the Middle East and its people for its own geopolitical benefit. (Neo)Orientalism and Orientalism-in-reverse are therefore mutually reinforcing positions that enable IS to flourish within the region and beyond. This introduction will first provide a brief history of IS, followed by critiques of a) (neo)Orientalist representations of IS, and b) how IS uses Orientalism-in-reverse to portray itself. Finally, the research question, the research methodology and the chapter breakdown will be explained.

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[2] The Sykes-Picot agreement (May 1916) recommended that France acquire Lebanon and the Syrian coast, Adana, Cilicia, Aintab, Urfa, Mardin, Diyarbakir, and Mosul, while Great Britain receive southern Mesopotamia, including Baghdad, Haifa, and Acre. See also: James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

[3] Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Speech with English subtitles," filmed July 4, 2014. YouTube video, 5:54. Published September 29, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOiN9boAmoI

A Brief History of IS: From Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

a) Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the establishment of al-Qaeda in Iraq

To understand the rise of IS we need to delve into the political life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an important figure in the establishment of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Al-Zarqawi, nee Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh, was born and raised in the impoverished town of Zarqa, Jordan. As a dedicated jihadist, he had fought with the Afghan mujahideen in the late 1980s and early 1990s before moving back to Jordan to establish an underground jihadist network called *Al-Tawhid* (later known as *Bayat al-Iman)* with his mentor, Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi. Mohamed Wasfi, a former jihadist who had met and conversed with al-Zarqawi in 1993 recalls the following of him:

> He was a simple Muslim who wanted to serve Islam. He didn't stay long here, and the next day he came with another guy. We sat, and we spoke about our hopes and dreams and ambitions to establish a caliphate and raise the flag of jihad against the enemies of Islam everywhere. I disagreed with him on some strategic issues, like his view of Israel and Palestine. He didn't have an idea of making jihad against Jews and Israel. Abu Musab wanted to change Arab regimes.[4]

While in Jordan, al-Zarqawi and al-Maqdisi were arrested in March 1994, tried in 1995, and received fifteen-year prison sentences for creating an illegal jihadist network. Arab prisons have been described as "incubators for future terrorists,"[5] and al-Zarqawi's intense experience in the al-Suwaqah prison led to his complete mental and physiological transformation. Journalist Fu'ad Hussein wrote that al-Zarqawi's prison experience "left a clear mark on al-Zarqawi's personality, which grew more intense. In his opinion, policemen, judges, and government members of all ranks were supporters of the regimes, which he believed were *tawagheet* [tyrants] who should be fought."[6] Al-Zarqawi also became adamant about learning the Qur'an, however, his little knowledge of classical Arabic meant that he relied heavily on "secondhand interpretations," making him more "susceptible to ideological indoctrination by hard-line Salafi-jihadist interpreters."[7] The al-Suwaqah prison experience completely reshaped al-Zarqawi's personality and he emerged as the natural leader of other

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[4] Nir Rosen, "Iraq's Jordanian Jihadis," *New York Times,* February 19, 2006, accessed January 17, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/magazine/iraq.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[5] Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 54

[6] Fu'ad Hussein, "Al-Zarqawi…: The Second Generation of Al Qaeda-Seif al-Adl's Testament," *al-Quds al-Arabi,* part 9, May 23, 2005 [in Arabic]

[7] Gerges, *ISIS,* 57

imprisoned jihadist fighters.8 Al-Zarqawi's story is instrumental in understanding his founding of AQI and the establishment of a new wave of jihadism.

b) From Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi

After his release in May 1999, al-Zarqawi moved to Afghanistan for the second time and established his own jihadist cell in Herat, where he recruited and trained insurgents. However, the 2001 American bombing of Herat forced al-Zarqawi and his followers to escape to Kandahar.9 Although al-Zarqawi was not a formal member of al-Qaeda Central (AQC), the 2001 US-invasion of Afghanistan, the dispersal of AQC, and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 led al-Zarqawi into northern Iraq to wage a war against coalition forces and the new Shi'a-majority government of Nouri al-Maliki. Al-Zarqawi's Iraqi cell relied on recruitment from the *Bilad al-Sham* [countries of the Levant], including Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and North Africa.10 Fu'ad Hussein attests that al-Zarqawi mobilized about five thousand fighters and twenty thousand homegrown supporters, which only highlights the swift militarization and radicalization of Iraqi society.11 In a 2004 policy memo outlining the differences between AQC and his own plan of action, al-Zarqawi expressed his desire to formally join the global jihadist movement. He concludes the memo with the following:

> This is our vision, and we have explained it. This is our path, and we have made it clear. If you agree with us on it, if you adopt it as a program and road, and if you are convinced of the idea of fighting the sects of apostasy, we will be your readied soldiers, working under your banner, complying with your orders, and indeed swearing fealty to you publicly and in the news media, vexing the infidels and gladdening those who preach the oneness of God.12

Despite strategic differences, al-Zarqawi ultimately accepted Osama bin Laden's leadership and changed the name of his organization, *al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad,* to *Tanzim Qa'idat al-*

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8 Ibid.*,* 56

9 Fu'ad Hussein, *Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, from Herat to Baghdad* [documentary] (Beirut: LBC TV, broadcast April 27 and 28, 2004) [in Arabic]

10 Gerges, *ISIS,* 66

11 Hussein, "Al-Zarqawi," part 3, May 16, 2005

12 Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "Musab al-Zarqawi Letter Obtained by United States Government in Iraq," US Department of State Archive, 2004, http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694/htm

Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn [Organization of Jihad's Base in Mesopotamia]*,* namely "Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers" or "Al-Qaeda in Iraq" (AQI) in 2004.[13]

By the time of al-Zarqawi's assassination in June 2006, he had already lost the support of many Iraqi Arabs and Muslims who were opposed to what they regarded as an excessive number of beheadings, kidnappings, and suicide bombings. Al-Zarqawi's former mentor, al-Maqdisi, even publically criticized his former student for his acts of terror against civilian populations. In a televised interview on *Al Jazeera,* al-Maqdisi "said that violence against civilians is wrong because it harms the interests of the *umma* [Islamic community] and tarnishes the image of Islam."[14] Al-Zarqawi's civilian attacks also pushed other radical Islamists to blame AQC, including bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, for allowing his actions to spiral out of control. Radical Saudi scholar, Salman al-Oudah pinned the responsibility of the bloodshed in Iraq on bin Laden for "spreading *takfiri* [the practice of excommunication] ideology and fostering a culture of suicide bombings that has caused […] suffering and brought ruin to entire Muslim communities and families."[15]

Soon after al-Zarqawi's death, the *Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen* [Mujahideen Shura Council], an umbrella organization that included AQI and seven similar groups, appointed Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajjer (also referred to as Abu Ayyub al-Masri) as AQI's new emir and defense minister respectively.[16] Later, the Mujahideen Shura Council merged AQI with compatible militias and declared the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) on October 13, 2006.[17] The transition from al-Zarqawi to Omar al-Baghdadi can be "characterized as a mafia-like network, carrying out hit-and-run assassinations and attacks against both Sunni and Shi'a enemies."[18] Omar al-Baghdadi's leadership mirrored that of al-Zarqawi to include the killing of about 1500 Sunnis in the Anbar province, the looting of property, and the kidnapping of women.[19] It is therefore not surprising that the deaths of both Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajjer, by a joint American-Iraqi raid near Tikrit on April 18, 2010, almost rid Iraq of both AQC and ISI. American forces commander general Raymond Odierno asserted that the "deaths of [the] terrorists is potentially the most

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[13] Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 163

[14] Gerges, *ISIS,* 91

[15] Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 298-299

[16] Dexter Filkins and John F. Burns, "U.S. Portrayal Helps Flesh Out Zarqawi's Heir," *New York Times,* June 16, 2006, accessed January 17, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/16/world/middleeast/16iraq.html

[17] Gerges, *ISIS*, 93

[18] Ibid., 94

[19] Sheikh Nabil Naeem, *Daesh: Al-Irhab al-Muqadas* [Daesh: The sacred terrorism] (Cairo, Al-Mahrousa, 2015), 14

significant blow to al-Qaeda in Iraq since the beginning of the insurgency."[20] Yet, this enthusiasm was short-lived for, between 2010 and 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emerged as the new leader of ISI and began rebuilding and rebranding the organization until it assumed its final name change, to simply the Islamic State (IS), in 2014.

c) Territorial conquests of the Islamic State

With its significant territorial conquests, IS claimed a monopoly of the global jihadist movement, and its military assault on Syria in 2013 and on Iraq in 2014 stunned the global audience. The Iraqi army, trained and equipped by the United States, and costing between $8 billion and $25 billion,[21] was crushed in Mosul by IS forces, which captured the city in 2014. In addition, between 2013 and 2014, IS effectively decimated Kurdish Iraqi and Syrian security forces, as well as rival Islamists, to capture the provinces of al-Raqqa and Deir al-Zour in Syria, and four Iraqi divisions in Mosul and northern Iraq.[22] IS' violent reach, which extends well beyond Iraq and Syria to countries like Lebanon, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, arguably exposed "the fragility of the Arab state system and the existence of profound ideological and communal cleavages within Middle Eastern and Islamic societies."[23] In its ambitious advance towards Baghdad, IS managed to dissolve the state boundaries between Iraq and Syria, seize numerous weapons and armed repositories, hike global oil prices, stimulate "sectarian and ethnic" conflicts across the Middle East, and rebrand Islamist extremism in order to appeal to a majority of young Sunni Muslims across the globe.[24] In addition, oil continued to shape the conflict in Iraq and Syria in many ways. The heavy flow of petrodollar revenues emerging from high oil prices "created disposable incomes that can be easily dispensed on regional arms races."[25] U.S. intelligence reports from March 2011 show that IS controlled oil fields in al-Omar, Jafra and Jeribe in Syria, and Ajil in Iraq.[26] The group is also estimated to have an oil potential of about 80,000 barrels a day for anywhere between $3 million to $8 million in daily income.[27] IS' control of significant oil and gas

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[20] Andrew England, "Al-Qaeda's Military Leaders in Iraq Killed," *Financial Times,* April 20, 2010, accessed January 17, 2017, www.ft.com/cms/s/0/e3b88b42-4c13-11df-a217-00144feab49a.html#axzz3WWWD4Y91
[21] Gerges, *ISIS,* 2
[22] Brian L. Steed, *ISIS: An Introduction and Guide to the Islamic State* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016), 119
[23] Gerges, *ISIS,* 3
[24] Ahmed Rashid, "ISIS: The New Taliban," *The New Yorker Review,* July 02, 2014, accessed May 28, 2016, http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/07/02/iraqs-new-taliban/
[25] Amy M. Jaffe and Elass Jareer, "War and the Oil Price Cycle," *Journal of International Affairs* 69 (2009): 122
[26] Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Understanding the Daesh Economy," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9 (2015)
[27] Ibid.

reserves in the region therefore has afforded them a viable income to fund their activities, though it remains to be seen to what extent the current military operation in Mosul (Iraq) and al-Raqqa (Syria) against IS will reduce their revenue.

(Neo)Orientalism and the Islamic State

IS's significant territorial conquests have given rise to several misleading attempts to understand its evolution and impact on local, regional and global geopolitics. Kyle Orton, for example, attributes the rise of IS to Saddam Hussein's alliance with Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s, thereby formally reorienting Iraq's foreign policy from secular Ba'athism to Islamism.[28] Orton also highlights the "Iraqi campaign of Islamization" after its defeat in Kuwait in 1991 and the Shi'a revolt that followed, arguing that Saddam's regime implemented a version of sharia law where "thieves had their hands cut off, homosexuals […] thrown from rooftops and prostitutes […] beheaded in public squares."[29] These policies, together with the deep network of Sunni tribal politics, Orton claims, set the groundwork for the rise of IS and the creation of its caliphate. According to this logic, Saddam's regime incubated sectarianism and religious militancy, thereby fostering an environment favorable for the rise of an armed Salafist movement. IS is therefore the afterlife of Saddam Hussein's regime.[30]

Orton's article bares salient similarities to Samuel Huntington's 1993 "clash of civilizations" article, in which he argued:

> The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict [in the aftermath of the Cold War] will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principle conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate world politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines for the future.[31]

Huntington's simplistic analysis, which makes religion the primary marker of "civilization," has inspired some of the present literature that attempt to explain the rise of IS. Some Western political commentators also tend to essentialize Middle Eastern actors and their behavioral practices in a way that connects the upsurge of "political violence in the region

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[28] Kyle Orton, "How Saddam Hussein Gave Us ISIS," *The New York Times,* December 23, 2015, accessed May 28, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/23/opinion/how-saddam-hussein-gave-us-isis.html?_r=0
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 7 (1993): 22

with the essential nature of the Muslim religion."[32] Cultural essentialism of this sort reproduces the Huntingtonian argument that we are in fact amidst a "clash of civilizations" that is violently manifesting itself not only in Iraq and Syria, but also internationally. It therefore becomes important to critically engage with diverse interpretations of Islam to understand that violent readings of the Qur'an are neither inherently Islamic nor un-Islamic, but are the product of varied interpretations of the same religious text. It is equally imperative to acknowledge that Orientalist and cultural essentialist arguments only "highlight the terms and stereotypes that produce [and reproduce] European beliefs."[33]

The Islamic State and Orientalism-in-Reverse

Huntington's "clash of civilizations" discourse has, for twenty-four years, flourished in the West and influenced the ways in which Western policymakers respond to the Middle East. The ways in which Huntington and other Orientalist writers construct images and ideas about the Middle East are, somehow, the reverse image of what groups like IS project about the West. Orientalism therefore has its mirror reflection in the Middle East, namely Orientalism-in-reverse. Huntington's "clash of civilization" discourse, for example, is echoed in the ideological repertoire of IS, particularly in how IS continues to exploit elements that are present in the region, such as the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, for their own geopolitical advantage.

The "Sykes-Picot" narrative

The "Sykes-Picot" narrative is a problematic discourse used by the IS leadership to justify their goals and violent actions in the Middle East. While it can be argued that, within the Arab political discourse, "Sykes-Picot" indicates the British and French conquest of the Middle East during the First World War and "covert attempts to retain control of Arab lands in the aftermath of the conflict through the division of the region into separate states,"[34] what is alarming is that the Sykes-Picot agreement continues to be exploited by the IS leadership for the organization's political, economic, and territorial benefit. Indeed, the Sykes-Picot agreement was a problematic byproduct of colonialism that constructed equally problematic borders in the Middle East; however, IS' vision for the future of the region, one that involves the re-drawing of postcolonial borders to create smaller political entities based on ethno-

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[32] Richard Falk, interviewed by Dan Falcone, "Richard Falk on ISIS and Islamic 'Essentialism.'" truth-org, March 19, 2015

[33] Siba Grovogui, "Postcolonialism," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 253

[34] Toby Dodge, "Can Iraq Be Saved?" *Survival* 56 (2014): 7

religious identities, is profoundly ahistorical as the group merely uses a segment of the past to justify "an opportunistic military campaign that capitalizes on the lawlessness wrought by Syria's civil war and on the weaknesses of Iraq's security forces."[35] The representation of the Sykes-Picot bargain as an impetus for decades of instability in the Middle East is both empirically unviable and analytically implausible as it disregards important socio-political factors that unraveled during and after the First World War. In fact, many of the states created in the Middle East were a byproduct of a series of post-war settlements and multilateral peace conferences that were influenced by how both the region and the international order were transformed by the war. Thus, the dubious use of the Sykes-Picot discourse to justify IS' goals and actions illustrates Orientalism-in-reverse as it denounces those states that emerged after the First World War as illegitimate creations that have no validity amongst their populations, and are therefore the root causes of all problems. In addition, this view advocates for the replacement of post-war states with "smaller, more coherent units that can gain the allegiance of their citizens."[36]

As delineated in upcoming chapters, IS feeds off the grievances of large segments disenfranchised Iraqi and Syrian civil societies, and seeks to highlight religious and ethnic identities as the primary marker of identification in the Middle East. I challenge IS's exploitation of these grievances and staunchly argue that the dissolution of postcolonial states would not entirely result in more "neutral," peaceful political entities that are defined by homogenous "sectarian" or ethnic identities. A look at the current world map would further problematize this argument; most states in the international system emerged from violent colonial conquests and struggles for independence. As such, "the post-colonial origins of a state do not in any way nullify its ability to function once the metropole has been driven out."[37] In addition, there currently exists no "clear evidence from Iraqi history to suggest that Iraqi Sunnis have [always] hated Iraqi Shi'is (or vice versa)."[38] Analyzing the intricate web of Iraqi and Syrian politics solely through ethno-religious identities as IS frequently does, or denying their existence altogether, is completely damaging as it overlooks the complexities within multiple layers of identities.[39] Indeed, there is no denying that populations within

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[35] Jennifer Thea Gordon, "ISIS' Desire to Erase Sykes-Picot Is Rooted in Fiction, Not History," *The National Interest,* September 17, 2014, accessed January 16, 2017, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/isis'-desire-erase-sykes-picot-rooted-fiction-not-history-11293

[36] Dodge, "Can Iraq Be Saved?" 9

[37] Ibid.

[38] Peter Sluglett, "The British, the Sunnis and the Shi'is: Social hierarchies of identity under the British mandate," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 4 (2010): 258

[39] Eric Davis, "Introduction: The question of sectarian identities in Iraq," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 4 (2010): 230

societies with numerous and complex ethnic and religious divisions are aware of their "differences." However, these differences acquire political significance when a crisis emerges that "allows sectarian entrepreneurs [such as IS] to promote the transformation of the awareness of historical grievances into political action."[40] Sectarian entrepreneurs are thus able to use past grievances to generate strong vertical binaries of identity. For example, the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and its post-invasion policies, and the violent rise and growth of IS, all worked to institutionalize the sectarianization of Iraqi society. The occupation of Iraq, followed by the ongoing Syrian conflict (2011-), has created conditions for violent insurgent groups like IS to exploit certain conditions and aspects present in the Middle East, including diverse ethnic/religious identities and the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, in order to construct a particular violent Salafi-Wahhabi ideology, recruiting Sunni fighters from both within and beyond Iraqi-Syrian borders.

Research Question and Methodology

My research therefore challenges the range of conventional, Orientalist arguments about IS and sifts through the plethora of available information on the organization to historicize and contextualize the origins and nature of this organization. I undertake historical research and archival methodology, which include the locating, evaluating, interpretation, and analysis of sources,[41] to answer the following question: *why did the political conditions of Iraq after 2003 foster an environment favorable for the rapid and ambitious rise of the Islamic State?* I consult both secondary and primary sources, including personal collections, official sources, transcripts and videos, to challenge existing findings, and trace the historical and sociopolitical origins of IS in a specific 2003 Iraqi context and in the Syrian crisis that erupted in 2011. I implement a critical, postcolonial, and political economy theoretical approach to challenge preexisting Orientalist and cultural essentialist explanations about the rise of IS. Such an approach will recognize IS as part of a new wave of jihadism that thrives on the regional instability of the Middle East, the political struggles within some Arab communities, the fierce "sectarianism" instigated by the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and the post-invasion policies of former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, and the geostrategic friction between Shi'a Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia.

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[40] Ibid., 238
[41] Alan Bryman et al. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE, 2003), 20-21

Thesis Structure: Chapter Breakdown

As such, my research is divided into four main chapters. *Chapter One*, "The Limits of (Neo)Orientalism and Orientalism-in-reverse, and the Merits of Critical Postcolonialism," offers a detailed analysis of (neo)Orientalist arguments used by both Western and non-Western observers to describe people and politics of the Middle East, and how groups like IS project a reversed image of this discourse about the West, and "Western" ideals and values, to justify their actions in the region. This chapter argues that (neo)Orientalism is echoed in the Middle East in the form of Orientalism-in-reverse; both discourses are equally problematic and mutually reinforce each other to enable groups like IS to flourish within the Middle East and beyond its borders. As such, both (neo)Orientalism and Orientalism-in-reverse offer inadequate explanations about the rise and rapid growth of IS. This theoretical chapter therefore establishes critical historical and postcolonialism as the foundation on which we can begin to analyze the historical conditions, policies and practices that led to the rise of IS first in Iraq and then in Syria. *Chapter Two*, "The Anglo-American Invasion of Iraq and its Aftermath," presents the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq as the trigger for the establishment of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The invasion, together with the policy of de-Ba'athification and Nouri al-Maliki's exclusive and corrupt government institutionalized ethnic and sectarian divisions, thereby creating an environment favorable for the creation and expansion of AQI and later IS. *Chapter Three* on "The Syrian Proxy War follows the militarization of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and its descent into a full-blown proxy/civil war. Bashar al-Assad's violent suppression of peaceful protestors characterized anti-regime protest in purely sectarian terms, further radicalizing the conflict. Such an environment only empowered militant Islamist groups who depicted themselves as protectors of the Sunni community in Syria. In addition, the involvement of regional and global powers including the West, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Iran, Russia, and China, who support different factions of the Syrian conflict, complicates the situation and further endangers civilians. Lastly, *Chapter Four*, "Militant Wahhabism and Salafism," traces the genealogy of Wahhabism as a specific interpretation of the Hanbali school of Islamic thought. The evolution of Wahhabism and Salafism as violent and militant manifestations of particular readings of Islamic texts have created a strong ideological force among IS followers, recruits, and supporters. These interpretations are also used to justify violent IS actions towards non-Muslims *and* both Sunni and Shi'a communities in Iraq and Syria. I conclude my thesis with a summary of my findings and advocate for an examination of political, economic, and historical conditions,

rather than an ahistorical and essentialist reading of culture and tradition, in attempting to understand the violence and terror propagated by militant Salafi-jihadist groups like IS. My findings illustrate that conventional neo-Orientalist and Orientalism-in-reverse arguments, based on the "inherent" culture of the Middle East that is opposed to Western ideas and values, are insufficient in explaining the rise and growth of IS. It is therefore imperative to apply a critical postcolonial approach to understand how the brutal wars in Iraq and Syria created environments favorable for IS's development.

The Limits of (Neo)Orientalism and Orientalism-in-Reverse, and the Merits of Critical Postcolonialism

Introduction

The establishment of the Islamic State (IS), and the violent spread of its agenda both within and beyond Iraqi-Syrian borders, has given rise to a multitude of attempts to understand its nature and evolution. On the one hand, Orientalist and neo-Orientalist attempts at understanding this phenomenon emphasize the "deep, innate" and *cultural* conditions of the Middle East and its people that made it possible for the rise of IS in the region. On the other hand, IS projects a reversed image of (neo)Orientalist discourses about the West, in the form of Orientalism-in-reverse, arguing that Western values are antithetical to Islam's "true" nature. Both (neo)Orientalist and Orientalism-in-reverse discourses are evenly problematic and form the core narratives for many Western observers and IS supporters who seek to understand the Middle East and react to its politics. This chapter outlines the conventional (neo)Orientalist theoretical arguments used to describe the politics and peoples of the Middle East, examines how IS constructs a mirror discourse about the West and "Western" values, and argues that both (neo)Orientalism and Orientalism-in-reverse are problematic discourses that reinforce each other and enable IS to flourish within the region. This chapter therefore proposes an alternative, critical historical and postcolonial perspective that not only challenges the former ways of thinking, but also pushes us to consider the importance of *political* and *historical* aspects of the region. A critical historical and postcolonial approach includes two key elements: First, it identifies recurrent discourses and practices of Western hegemony that emerge out of Orientalism/neo-Orientalism, and cautiously allows for the inclusion of "indigenous views and dissident voices that are explicitly critical of ahistorical, apolitical, state-centric, and mono-causal understandings"[42] of centuries of political violence. Second, a critical historical and postcolonial approach contextualizes and historicizes past and present social, economic, ideological, and political power structures to gain a deeper understanding of why certain groups of individuals use force to challenge the preexisting system. For the purpose of this thesis, this critical approach will engage closely with Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism." This approach also involves the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses and their impact on certain societies, the recognition of the dark

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[42] Ayla Gol, "The War on Terror and the Rise of Neo-Orientalism in the 21st Century," *e-ir,* March 18, 2010, accessed December 06, 2016, http://www.e-ir.info/2010/03/18/the-war-on-terror-and-the-rise-of-neo-orientalism-in-the-21st-century/

realities of colonial and imperial practices, and the decoding of neo-Orientalist and Orientalism-in-reverse discourses and representations that manifest themselves in the twenty-first century. As such, this chapter rejects the simplicity of (neo)Orientalist and Orientalism-in-reverse analyses of the Middle East and instead places critical postcolonialism at the core of analyzing the historical conditions, policies, and practices that led to the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria.

Edward Said's *Orientalism*

Edward Said's 1978 masterpiece, *Orientalism,* wove a tapestry of critical thought about the language and discourse that emerged from Western-centric literature about the relationship between the East and the West, and Islam and the West in particular.[43] Orientalist discourses were used to empower and commission Western ascendancy and superiority by creating a dualism between Islam and the West. Such discourses have created "the self" and "the other" binary "in order to justify and naturalize some structured patterns of domination and exploitation."[44] Because "the other" is often represented as being significantly inferior to "the self," dualism is used to "legitimize some of the implications of hierarchical power and to show who gets what, when and how."[45] Dualism does not center around whether there is a difference between peoples, but posits that there exists an innate otherness making one group of people somewhat less human and, thus, subject to coercion and compulsion by another group. The purpose of this dualistic discourse in the political and social realms is to vindicate how "we" treat "them." Ultimately, dualism boils down how "they" are inherently different, thereby entirely "dismissing their commonalities with 'us' as members of the human race."[46]

a) Myths about the Orient and their Implications

Orientalism is therefore a mechanism of power located primarily in "language and processes of translation of the identities, cultures, and religions of the Middle East."[47] Orientalist discourses, as created bodies of theory and practice that embody "a system of knowledge about the Orient,"[48] have continued to be produced and reproduced over time. For

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[43] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1978)
[44] Mohammad Samiei, "Neo-Orientalism? The relationship between the West and Islam in our globalised world," *Third World Quarterly*, 31 (2010): 1146
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Grovogui, "Postcolonialism," 253
[48] Yahya Sadowski, "The new Orientalism and the democracy debate," *Middle East Report* 183 (1993), 14

example, Said's "Shattered Myths" illustrates how the creation of myths about Arab society work to preserve the discourse of Orientalism "whose focus includes 'the Arabs, Arabism, Islam, the Semites, and 'the Arab mind.'"[49] Despite the fact that there lacks an effective intellectual method for discussing concepts like "the Arab mind" or "Arab society" as single monolithic ideas, Said examines texts by Sania Hamady, Raphael Patai, and Gil Carl Alroy to "analyze the structure of thought for which such a phrase as 'Arab society' is a kind of reality."[50] In *Temperament and Character of the Arabs,* Hamady claims,

> The Arabs… have demonstrated an incapacity for disciplined and abiding unity… They show lack of coordination and harmony in organization and function, nor have they revealed an ability for cooperation. Any collective action for common benefit or mutual profit is alien to them… The Arab has little chance to develop his potentialities and define his position in society, holds little belief in progress and change, and finds salvation only in the hereafter.[51]

Hamady's use of verbs like "demonstrate," "reveal," and "show" constructs certain types of "truths" about the "inherent" nature of the Arab people. Similarly, Patai's *The Arab Mind* equates close kinship relations within Arab communities to a rejection of Western modernism, development, democratization, and industrialization.[52] Patai's analysis of the "Arabs," a problematic term from the onset as it implies ethnic and religious homogeneity, stems from psychological and cultural explanations of their "backwardness" and "stagnation."[53] According to him, Arabs possess "a sense of marginality which never allows [them] to detach [themselves] from [their] traditional culture."[54] Alroy, building on Patai's argument, grounds the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation entirely on the "basic personality traits peculiar to Arab peoples," thereby strongly implying that Arabs are "fiercely vengeful people."[55] The type of language used to construct particular depictions of Arab peoples have had, and continue to have, instrumental and life-altering political implications not only for the Arabs, but also for the entire Middle East region. Several like-minded individuals, including Hamady, Patai, and Alroy, further assert that the Arabs lack "psychological readiness" and the cultural tools required for them to become fully-fledged

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[48] Said, *Orientalism,* 14

[49] Edward W. Said, "Shattered Myths," in *Orientalism: A Reader* ed. A. L. Macfie (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 89

[50] Ibid.

[51] Sania Hamady, *Temperament and character of the Arabs* (Michigan: Twayne Publishers, 1960), 285

[52] Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Scribner, 1973)

[53] Elia T. Zureik, *The Palestinians in Israel: A Study in Internal Colonialism,* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 84

[54] Patai, *The Arab Mind,* 299-300

[55] Gil Carl Alroy, "Patterns of hostility," in *Attitudes towards Jewish Statehood in the Arab World,* (New York: American Academic Association for Peace in the Middle East, 1971), 58-59

members of democratic societies.56 Such narratives strongly indicate that Arabs lack the "civic ethos necessary for political communities,"57 making them incapable of representing themselves and must therefore be represented.

Ideas about the Arabs and Muslims, as monolithic people, can also be found in Ernest Renan's 1883 lecture on "Islam and Science," where he argued that Islam was innately irrational, intolerant, and incapable of generating scientific or philosophic knowledge, claiming that,

> Anyone with even the slightest education in matters of our time sees clearly the current inferiority of Muslim countries, the decadence of states governed by Islam, the intellectual sterility of races that derive their culture and education from that religion alone. All who have been to the Orient or to Africa are struck by what is inevitably narrow-mindedness of a true believer, of that kind of iron ring around his head, making it absolutely closed to science, incapable of learning anything or of opening itself up to any new idea.58

Renan argued that it was in Islam's inherent nature to hate science because it was in competition with God; "by killing science, [Islam] as killed itself, and has been condemned worldwide to complete inferiority."59 In portraying the "other" as culturally and cognitively inferior to the West, Orientalist depictions also reflect the exercise of power in knowledge production, which can then translate into political and economic power over the "other." Classical Orientalism portrayed the Orient, including the Muslim Middle East, as a fixed, monolithic entity that was grounded on tradition, culture and society.60 The Orient became a "peculiar entity, a universe essentially different from the West; it was exotic and feminine, irrational and emotional, despotic and basically inferior to the West."61 Accordingly, Islam, the inflexible and violent religion of the Middle East, governed culture and tradition, shaped individual values and norms, and promised cultural uniformity. Classical Orientalists, who date back to the nineteenth century, comprised of novelists, philosophers, and travelers who mostly remained oblivious to the cultural, linguistic, political, and religious diversities within non-Western societies. Most Orientalists, arguably, drew largely from religious texts, including the Qur'an and *hadith* [accounts of the Prophet Muhammad], to inadequately understand Muslims. Perceiving the Orient in this manner only served as further justification

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56 Ibid., 48

57 Dag Tuastad, "Neo-Orientalism and the new barbarism thesis: aspects of symbolic violence in the Middle East conflict(s)," *Third World Quarterly* (2003): 592

58 Ernest Renan, "Islam and Science," *A Lecture Presented at La Sorbonne,* March 29, 1883, translated by Sally P. Ragep (2011), accessed April 4, 2017, https://www.mcgill.ca/islamicstudies/files/islamicstudies/renan_islamism_cversion.pdf

59 Ibid.

60 Ian N. Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 11

61 Ibid.

for European colonial rule over "inferior cultures," and continues to inform contemporary policymaking both in Western and non-Western societies. The "Western path of development and democracy," regarded as the only legitimate path to advancement, was able to save "the Third World (developing/developed countries) from the dangers of the Second World (the communist bloc) and, equally important, emancipate these countries from their traditional values that stood as impediments to the spread of both liberalism and capitalism."[62]

b) Samuel Huntington and the "Clash of Civilizations"

Samuel Huntington's article, "The Clash of Civilizations," has become a manifesto of contemporary Orientalism. The article first appeared in the 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs,* where he attempted to predict the future of world politics after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Huntington claimed:

> It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation-states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principle conflicts of global conflict will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.[63]

Most of Huntington's argument was constructed on a loose concept of "civilizational identity" and "the interactions among seven or eight [*sic*] major civilizations,"[64] of which the conflict between Islam and the West would be the more aggressive. Borrowing largely from Bernard Lewis' 1990 article on "The Roots of Muslim Rage," Huntington reduced the "West" and "Islam" to single, monolithic, and fixed identities, thereby completely disregarding the wealth of diversity and plurality within each culture and civilization. According to Said, Huntington also diminished the integrity of every civilization by asserting that cultures and identities are "shut-down, sealed off entities that have been purged of the myriad currents and countercurrents that animate human history,"[65] and that time has made it possible for that history to contain both religious conflicts *and* cultural exchanges between

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[62] Mojtaba Mahdavi and W. Andy Knight, *Towards the Dignity of Difference?: Neither "end of History" Nor "clash of civilizations"* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 2
[63] Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," 22
[64] Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation,* October 4, 2001, accessed December 06, 2016, https://www.thenation.com/article/clash-ignorance/
[65] Ibid.

different cultures and religions. Huntington uses "selective historical memories of shared experience, perceived racial similarity, linguistic affinity, and common religion,"[66] which work together to fuse a multitude of different cultures, peoples, and traditions to imagine a single, "monolithic" civilization. In their article, Bottici and Challand illustrate how the "clash of civilizations" thesis has become a powerful political myth in how it is both received and reproduced in discourse, and social and political practices.[67] The idea of a "clash of civilizations" has shaped how people think *and* act in the world in which they live. Huntington's "clash of civilizations" is thus a "self-fulfilling prophecy" because a political myth "is not only the result of an existing identity, but is the means of creating an identity yet to come."[68]

It is worth noting that Huntington was the Coordinator of Security Planning for the United States National Security Council (NSC) from 1977 to 1978. As part of the NSC, Huntington claimed that civilizations were "the ultimate human tribes, and the clash of civilizations is tribal conflict on the global scale."[69] Moreover, between 1980 and 1995, the United States was involved in seventeen military operations in the Middle East against Muslim populations,[70] with no "comparable pattern of US operations against the people of any other civilization."[71] This pattern led Huntington to question *why*, more than any other civilization, the Islamic civilization was involved in more inter-group violence and, moreover, "how one could explain the demonstrated contemporary Muslim propensity to group violence."[72] Like many other Orientalists before him, Huntington sought his answers within the Islamic religion. It is also useful to note that by the 1990s, political Islam was perceived to be the single most pressing threat to a unified Judeo-Christian civilization that was widely accepted in the West following the collapse of communism. Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, as well as other Orientalist texts and discourses, are intellectually careless and simplistic, particularly because it highlights religion as the primary indicator of "civilizational identity." Indeed, while religious affiliation bears importance in understanding

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[66] Mohammed Ayoob, "Was Huntington Right? Revisiting the Clash of Civilizations," *Insight Turkey* 14 (2012), 1

[67] Bottici and Challand, "Rethinking Political Myth," 323

[68] Ibid.

[69] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Michigan: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 207

[70] US operations in the Middle East against Muslim populations between 1980 and 1995 include, but are in no way limited to, the following examples: Operation Eagle Claw in Iran (April 1980), Multinational Force in Lebanon (August 1982), Action in the Gulf of Sidra, Libya (1986), Iran-Iraq War (1987-1988), and the Gulf War (1991)

[71] Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,* 217

[72] Ibid.

a region and its various cultures, it would be irresponsible to make it the single-most marker for defining civilizations, particularly because each civilization encompasses a diversity of peoples, societies, histories, cultures, religions, and realities. In essence, the Huntingtonian argument is merely "a discursive apparatus that produces knowledge as an instrument of power, as a means to establish or maintain domination."[73]

c) Fallacies within Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" Discourse

When it was first published, Huntington's article received strong criticism from the academic community; while Johann Arnason claimed that his conceptualization of "civilization" rejected diversity and plurality within each culture,[74] Fawaz Gerges believed that contemporary politics was shaped by a clash of interests and not cultures.[75] In addition, Charles Kupchan also noted Huntington's over-emphasis on the cultural differences between Islam and the West, rather than focusing on the particular behavior of radical extremist groups that thrived off the discontent within Muslim-majority societies.[76] Yet, the 9/11 attacks reinstated the "clash of civilizations" argument in an attempt to explain the motivations behind the events. Following the attacks, *The New York Times*, for example, initiated a new section called "A Nation Challenged" with the titles of the headings referring quite explicitly to the "clash" between Islam and the West. Some of these titles read: "Yet, this is about Islam," "Jihad 101," "The Force of Islam," and "The deep intellectual roots of Islamic rage,"[77] thereby focusing exclusively on religious and cultural motivations, and not political and economic factors, for the attacks.

Some scholars believe that part of the Huntingtonian appeal was that it answered questions about the post-Cold War international order.[78] The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union left a political vacuum in both global politics and the media.[79] A new enemy was therefore needed to fill this vacuum. The "clash of civilizations" narrative provided the hegemon with a means to create this new enemy, as a political myth, because it operated "with icons, that is fragmentary and allusive references or subtle associations of

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73 Asef Bayat, "Neo-Orientalism," *Futures We Want,* September 19, 2015, accessed December 06, 2016, http://futureswewant.net/asef-bayat-neo-orientalism/
74 Johann P. Arnason, "Civilizational Analysis, History of," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences, Vol. 3,* ed. Neil J. Smelser et al. (Oxford and New York: Elsevier, 2001)
75 Fawaz A. Gerges, *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)
76 Charles A. Kupchan, *The End of the American Era* (New York: Kopf, 2002), 70
77 Ervand Abrahamian, "The US Media, Huntington and September 11," *Third World Quarterly* 24 (2003), 531
78 Philip Seib, "The News Media and the 'Clash of Civilizations," *Parameters Winter* 05 (2004), 72
79 Ibid., 76

images that are apprehended through more or less conscious exposure to them."[80] These icons work in ways that make it difficult for political myths to face critical discourse and analysis. Vincent Geisser argued that the media operates in the "*mise en ordre médiatique du sense commun*," or the "media systemization of a general discourse about Islam" that portrays the entire religion as a sacrosanct and violent bloc.[81] The construction of rigid dichotomies, "schematized violence and an aesthetical transition of these themes into icons" are all fundamental aspects of what Said calls "Orientalist discourses."[82]

In their book, Mojtaba Mahdavi and W. Andy Knight rightfully delineate three logical fallacies within Huntington's thesis. First, Huntington assumes that there is a single cohesive notion of a civilizational identity, where there exists a single Western entity and a single Rest that emerged organically from culture.[83] Yet, history begs us to reconsider this reductionist supposition, and acknowledge that civilizational identity "is [almost always] mobilized through a discourse that of necessity must create a constitutive 'other.'"[84] There is also debate about the qualities that define "civilization," and the groups of people that constitute various civilizations. There can be no single Western entity; the "West" is full of contradictions, from promoting democracy and liberalism in Western Europe after the Second World War to propping up brutal dictators in Latin America during the Cold War. Similarly, there is no single, cohesive Rest. The "Rest" includes Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement and efforts towards holistic environmental conservation in Kenya, *and* Sudan's Omar al-Bashir's part in the deaths of about 400,000 people caused by violence and famine. Thus, it can be determined that civilizations are far from homogenous entities; rather, there exist "official and unofficial, current and countercurrent voices within each civilization."[85] Each civilization is therefore "a dynamic plural entity, not a shut-down, sealed-off unit."[86]

Second, Huntington claims that there is an innate, rudimentary difference between the Western civilization and that represented by Islam. He argues that the "fundamental problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism… [but] Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power."[87] Islam and the "Islamic mind" are therefore incompatible with Western

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[80] Bottici and Challand, "Rethinking Political Myth," 326
[81] Vincent Geisser, *La nouvelle Islamophobie* (Paris: Découverte, 2003), 24
[82] Bottici and Challand, "Rethinking Political Myth," 326
[83] Mojtaba Mahdavi and W. Andy Knight, *Towards the Dignity of Difference?: Neither "end of History" Nor "clash of civilizations"* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 4
[84] Ibid., 5
[85] Ibid.
[86] Said, "The Clash of Ignorance"
[87] Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,* 217

ideals of liberty and democracy. However, as Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid notes: "to speak about an 'Islamic Mind' in abstraction from all constraints of geography and history, and in isolation from the social and cultural conditioning of Islamic societies, can only lead us to unrealistic, even metaphysical speculations."[88] It is crucial to acknowledge the economic, political, and historical factors that hinder democratization in Muslim majority societies. To assume that Islam is incompatible with democracy generates a misleading assumption about the unitary nature of Islam, and disregards the diversity of cultures and beliefs within the Islamic faith. This by no means denies the fact that some impediments to democracy are legitimized using the Islamic doctrine,[89] or that the "politicization of cultural difference" has sometimes led to conflicts between various groups.[90] Rather, Huntington's thesis fails to acknowledge that, throughout history, civilizations assisted each other towards development. The Islamic civilization, for instance, was partly responsible for the "revival of modern Western civilization during the Renaissance and Enlightenment eras."[91] It is therefore illegitimate to assume a fundamental and perpetual clash between Islam and the West, when the West, for example, supported a 1953 coup in Iran to overthrow liberal Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and reinstated the monarchical rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

Third, the Yugoslav wars (1991-2001) and the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea (1998-2000) are clear examples of *intra*-civilizational, rather than *inter*-civilizational, conflicts.[92] Mahdavi and Knight argue that such examples highlight "the core realist critique of the 'clash of civilizations' thesis by suggesting that states, not civilizations, continue to be the primary actors of international politics."[93] Realism assumes that states will always act in ways that further their own national interest, be it economic, political, or military. As such, scholars have offered several alternatives to Huntington's belligerent thesis. Stanley Hoffmann suggested that perhaps contemporary global conflicts are not characterized by a "clash of civilizations" but a "clash of globalizations."[94] According to Hoffman, the post-Cold War era can be described as "the clash between the fragmentation of states (and the state system) and the progress of economic, cultural, and political integration- in other words,

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[88] Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid, "Heaven, Which Way," *Al Ahram,* September 12-18, 2002, accessed December 06, 2016, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2002/603/sc16-17.htm
[89] Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation* (London: Tauris, 1996), 116
[90] Mahdavi and Knight, *Towards the Dignity of Difference,* 8
[91] Ibid.
[92] Dieter Senghaas, *The Clash of Civilizations: Coming to Terms with Cultural Conflicts* (London: Routledge, 2002)
[93] Mahdavi and Knight, *Towards the Dignity of Difference,* 9
[94] Stanley Hoffmann, "A Clash of Globalizations," *Foreign Affairs* 81 (2002): 104

globalization."[95] Economic globalization in particular can be singled out as one of the root causes of global inequality and yet market competition and neoliberal policies hinder both state and non-state actors from managing this challenge. In addition, Benjamin Barber argues that cultural globalization, while exporting American products, popular culture and lifestyle to some parts of the world, has also promoted anti-American and anti-Western sentiments across the globe. Contemporary global conflict is thus as a clash between Jihad and the McWorld because there exists a "collision between the forces of disintegral tribalism and reactionary fundamentalism (or Jihad) and the forces of integrative modernization and aggressive economic and cultural globalization (McWorld)."[96] Barber asserts that the "Jihadists' quarrel is not with modernity [per se] but with the aggressive neoliberal ideology… they suspect that what Americans understand as prudent unilateralism is really a form of arrogant imperialism."[97] Likewise, Tariq Ali characterizes contemporary global conflicts as a "clash of fundamentalisms," a clash "between two tiny aggravated minorities who exploit religious/cultural rhetoric and discourse for political purposes."[98] Huntington's argument and similar Orientalist discourses are therefore nothing more than naïve attempts to reduce past and present global tensions to religious and cultural differences between various societies.

Neo-Orientalism and Orientalism-in-Reverse

Despite strong criticism, Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis has, for twenty-four years, become an influential discourse that continues to inform Western public opinion and Western policymaking in the Middle East. In contemporary times, Huntington's thesis has manifested itself into neo-Orientalist and Orientalism-in-reverse discourse. For neo-Orientalism, the term "neo" rather than "new" is used to describe the continuity of the traditional forms of Orientalism that Said illustrated in 1978. Like classical Orientalism, neo-Orientalism is "monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic, and based on an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other."[99] Neo-Orientalism is therefore not a *sui generis*, but an extension of traditional forms of Orientalist language and discourse. Indeed, while classical Orientalists perceived the Muslim state to be stronger than the society

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[95] Ibid.
[96] Benjamin R. Barber, "Era of Jihad vs. McWorld," in *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order* eds. Kim Both and Tim Dunne (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2002), 245
[97] Ibid., 248-249
[98] Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2003), 202
[99] Ali Behdad and Juliet A. Williams, "On Neo-Orientalism Today," *Entekhabi,* 2012, accessed December 06, 2016, http://www.entekhabi.org/Texts/Neo_Orientalism_Today.htm

it was governing, thus alluding despotism in Muslim countries, "younger Orientalists," like Patricia Crone, claimed that the Islamic civilization distinguished itself from the Western civilization in its ability to reject and delegitimize political control. According to her, the *ulama* [Islamic scholars] responsible for drafting sharia law were profoundly hostile to settled states and defined "God's law as *haqq al-'arab* [the law of Arabs] just as they identified His language as the *lisan al-'arab,* [the normative language of the Bedouins] the consensus being that where God had not explicitly modified tribal law, he had endorsed it."[100] As a result, the "tribal vision of sacred politics" emerged, where kings were replaced and "God's community was envisaged as an egalitarian one unencumbered by profane or religious structures of power below the caliph."[101] Essentially, Crone's neo-Orientalist argument suggests that sharia law "codes are impossible for any regime to live up to," thus ensuring that governments will always be perceived as illegitimate by Muslim societies.[102]

Neo-Orientalism also insists on the incompatibility of Islam and democracy. Daniel Pipes' analysis for the Orient bears a striking resemblance to that of Huntington when he claims that Muslim societies "have the most terrorists and the fewest democracies in the world."[103] These newer ways of portraying Muslim and Arab perpetrated violence in Western media have been referred to as "new barbarism" by Dag Tuastad. Western media sources tend to over-represent such violence as innate to Islamic and/or Arabic culture, while concurrently neglecting to acknowledge the possible political and economic motives for the violence. The new barbarism thesis has deep neo-Orientalist roots that underscore an "inherent" cultural dualism between the West and Islam, which also serves as a powerful instrument for the continued subjugation of the other.[104] Furthermore, the most recent cases of neo-Orientalism include a bill asking the US Department of State to declare the Muslim Brotherhood a "foreign terrorist organization." In January 2017, US Senator Ted Cruz, one of the sponsors of the bill, cited the "civilization jihad" to charge the Brotherhood of espousing "a violent Islamist ideology with a mission of destroying the West," and to accuse several American Muslim organizations of being affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood.[105] Frank Gaffney, a key advisor to President Trump and the main author of the "civilization jihad"

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[100] Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 62-63
[101] Ibid.
[102] Sadowski, "The new Orientalism and the democracy debate," 18
[103] Daniel Pipes, "The Muslims are Coming! The Muslims are Coming!" *National Review* 42 (1990), 29
[104] Tuastad, "Neo-Orientalism and the new barbarism thesis," 592
[105] Khaled Abou El Fadl, "How Hatred of Islam is Corrupting the American Soul," *ABC Religion and Ethics,* January 19, 2017, accessed January 25, 2017, http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2017/01/18/4606049.htm

memorandum, proclaimed "the United States to be a Christian nation and the Western civilization as rooted in Judeo-Christian values that are currently under siege by global jihad and sharia."[106] Such neo-Orientalist perceptions of all Islamist organizations has given rise to anti-terrorism laws in the United States with infinite powers to monitor, arrest, detain, and convict individuals or groups who [they suspect] join, aid, assist, or support a "foreign terrorist organization."[107]

Indeed, categories of the "other," with their cultures and traditions, are not a new phenomenon; what is alarming is when these categorizations become "stereotypical, scientific, and authoritative apparatuses of knowledge production."[108] Neo-Orientalism is a form of knowledge production that plagues our contemporary political environment by creating unitary images of the "other." Globalization has furthered the neo-Orientalist project, making it a deeply embedded and multifaceted phenomenon. Particularly after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, neo-Orientalist discourses continue to distinguish Arabs and Muslims as overly politicized and violent individuals.[109] Proponents of neo-Orientalism reside in think tanks, political institutions, popular culture, and the news media. These groups are systematically producing knowledge about the Orient in ways that shape how the Western populous receives and understands information about Islam, Muslims, and Arabs. This knowledge production extends beyond the domain of popular opinion, seeping into foreign policy strategies and international relations. For instance, in January 2017, U.S. President Trump signed an executive order blocking Syrian refugees from entering the United States, and suspending immigration from seven Muslim-majority states, namely Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, in an effort to "curb" terrorism.[110] The war on terror has, in many ways, instilled specific ideas in the minds of Western political leaders about the terrorist who practices Islamic fundamentalism, shows hostility towards the West and Western values, and "is a product of social and political decay in the Muslim word."[111] The war on terror therefore omits political or economic motives for carrying out terrorist attacks. Terrorists, with no just cause for their actions, are perceived to afflict great damage on

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106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Bayat, "Neo-Orientalism"
109 Sedef Arat-Koç, "Dance of Orientalisms and waves of catastrophes:
culturalism and pragmatism in imperial approaches to Islam and the Middle East," *Third World Quarterly* 35 (2014): 1657
110 Julie H. Davis, "Trump Blocks Syrian Refugees and Orders Mexican Border Wall to Be Built," *The New York Times,* January 25, 2017, accessed January 26, 2017,
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/us/politics/refugees-immigrants-wall-trump.html?_r=0
111 Grovogui, "Postcolonialism," 254

civilized, Western societies who then have absolute legitimacy to violently confront terrorism without any consideration for international human rights norms and conventions. As such, the Orient and its people are not only portrayed as being static and archaic, but also as imminent threats to the liberal values and "civilizational integrity" of the West.[112]

In writing *Orientalism* and subsequent scholarship, Said was wary of suggesting a dualistic approach to this argument, claiming the "answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism;"[113] Occidentalism referring to the different ways in which non-Western individuals and groups, including IS in the present day, perceive and present the West. Both extremist Islamists and non-Western autocrats continue to play active roles in over-simplifying ideas about the "West" and "modernity," depicting them as imminent threats to Islam.[114] For instance, in 1992, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia claimed that the "prevailing [Western] democratic system in the world is not suitable for us [Arabs and Muslims] in this region, for our peoples' composition and traits are different from the traits of the world."[115] Another important example of Occidentalism in the present day is the ways in which IS continues to portray the West as antithetical to Islam. As such, both Orientalism and Occidentalism are dangerous ways of analyzing and perceiving the people and politics of the Middle East. The arguments expressed by Crone and Pipes as part of the neo-Orientalist discourse have mirror reflections in the Middle East in the form of Orientalism-in-reverse. Groups like IS use Western policies and practices, at home and in the Middle East, including the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and Nouri al-Maliki's post-invasion government, to construct similar discourses that insist on the inherent incompatibility between Islam and "Western" values and ideals. For example, IS used the grievances of Iraqi and Syrian civil societies, due to their marginalization by the governments in Baghdad and Damascus respectively, to justify their actions in declaring an Islamic caliphate in 2014. The IS leadership asserted that the "legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations" became null by the very establishment and expansion of its authority.[116] (Neo)Orientalist discourses about the Orient therefore have their match as part of IS's ideological repertoire. In addition, President Trump's "Muslim ban" also played into IS's discourse about the American war on Islam or, in Huntingtonian terms, the "clash of civilizations" between the

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[112] Bayat, "Neo-Orientalism"
[113] Said, *Orientalism,* 328
[114] Chiara Bottici and Benoit Challand, "Rethinking Political Myth: The Clash of Civilizations as a Self-fulfilling Prophecy," *European Journal of Social Theory* 9 (2006), 323
[115] Yahya Sadowski, "The new Orientalism and the democracy debate," *Middle East Report* 183 (1993), 14
[116] IS declaration of Islamic caliphate, "This is the Promise of Allah," 2014, accessed February 22, 2017, https://ia902505.us.archive.org/28/items/poa_25984/EN.pdf

West and Islam. In their online magazine *Dabiq,* IS warned that "Muslims in the crusader countries [the West] will find themselves driven to abandon their homes… as the crusader increase persecution against Muslims living in Western lands."[117] President Trump's executive order has therefore reinforced IS's ideological position, creating an environment where the organization can continue to flourish and gain more support. The (neo)Orientalist discourse has a powerful mirror image in IS's ideological doctrine that is used to recruit fighters and supporters across the globe. Orientalism-in-reverse is also a powerful discourse that projects a reflection of (neo)Orientalist rhetoric about the West and is, in most cases, fueled and enabled by contentious Western policy discourses.

Conclusion: Critical Postcolonialism as an Alternative Approach

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the unresolved and increasingly turbulent Israeli-Palestinian issue, the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent acts of terror in the name of Islam have positioned the Islamic faith at the center of global politics. As this chapter has demonstrated, Orientalist discourses and the old Islam-and-West dualism still have a great presence in the contemporary world. Such ideas have been reconstructed and distributed to fashion a new global neo-Orientalist framework that is currently attempting to explain the rise of IS as a natural, innate component of the cultures and traditions of Muslim-majority communities. Neither classical Orientalism nor neo-Orientalism, and their essentialist reading of culture, religion and tradition, are able to capture the complexity and multidimensional nature of IS. An Orientalist and neo-Orientalist approach fails to incorporate key political, economic, and historical factors that help explain the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria.

A critical and historical postcolonial perspective, found in the works of Mojtaba Mahdavi, Asef Bayat, and Fawaz Gerges, for example, historicizes and contextualizes IS, examines multiple factors in its rise, and analyzes the interplay of complex relations between political, economic, and social factors in fully understanding the origins and rise of this phenomenon. This critical approach also historicizes and evaluates asymmetrical power structures and the uneven "distribution of economic, political, and social power between the West and the non-Western countries with the 'combined development' of globalization."[118] The significance of this critical approach is twofold: the inclusion of indigenous and dissident voices that criticize ahistorical and apolitical analyses of colonialism and political violence,

[117] "The Islamic State's (ISIS, ISIL) Magazine" Dabiq Issue 13 accessed from The Clarion Project, September 10, 2014, accessed June 02, 2016, http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isilpropaganda-magazine-dabiq , 33

[118] Gol, "The War on Terror and the Rise of Neo-Orientalism in the 21st Century"

and the contextualization of both past and present social, economic, political, and ideological power structures in the Middle East. Without denying the importance of culture and religion in analyzing acts of terrorism and political violence, it is equally important, these authors argue, to trace the historical, political, and social roots of discontentment that remains persistent within former colonies. It is critical to acknowledge the enduring scars of colonialism, imperialism, and great power politics within Middle Eastern societies. The following chapter, on the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and its aftermath, builds from this critical standpoint and traces the establishment of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) back to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Chapter Two examines post-invasion policies, such as de-Ba'athification and the corrupt policies of Nouri al-Maliki's government, as crucial political and historical factors that led to the creation and expansion of AQI and later IS.

Chapter Two
The Anglo-American Invasion of Iraq and its Aftermath

Introduction

In March 2003, the United States and the coalition of the willing launched a pre-emptive strike against Iraq without the approval of the United Nations. The US claimed that Iraq threatened global security by harboring weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and having ties with al-Qaeda. However, when it became evident that Iraq did not have WMDs or links to al-Qaeda, the Bush administration and its coalition partners reframed the invasion as an "ambitious and unprecedented project to turn Iraq into a liberal democracy, underpinned by free-market capitalism and constituted by a citizen body free to live in peace and prosperity."[119] In reality, the invasion and occupation of Iraq became a chaotic geopolitical catastrophe that never achieved its elusive objectives, and was instead plagued by violence, military casualties, and mass civilian losses.

Over the past decade, Iraq's decline into devastation due to the rapid rise and advance of the Islamic State (IS) implores us to analyze the costs of the invasion, and assess the implications of the post-invasion policies that led to the dismantling of Iraqi state institutions in 2003. It is thus impossible to explain the rise of IS without first examining the interplay of complex political, economic, and cultural consequences of the Iraq War. The legacy of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, grounded in a critical historical and postcolonial theoretical approach, illustrates how decades of brutal dictatorship under Saddam Hussein, and the institutionalization of sectarianism by Nouri al-Maliki's post-invasion government, both exacerbated by foreign intervention, led to the rise and expansion of IS in Iraq.

This chapter therefore traces the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the predecessor of IS, back to the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, and its post-invasion policies. This will be done in four parts. First, this chapter outlines the implications of the economic sanctions regime imposed on the Iraqi Republic by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) between August 1990 and May 2003, and how this weakened the Iraqi civil society. Second, this chapter examines how the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, the destruction of the Iraqi state structure, and the policy of de-Ba'athification created a political vacuum that led to the establishment of AQI in 2004. Third, this chapter shows how the political vacuum

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[119] Benjamin Isakhan, *The Legacy of Iraq: From the 2003 War to the 'Islamic State.'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 1

created by the invasion and post-occupation policies led to the rise and growth of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and later the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in 2006. Fourth, I conclude by delineating how the invasion, occupation, and the exclusive and corrupt Shi'a-majority government of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki institutionalized sectarianism and empowered the rise and growth of IS.

Economic Sanctions and its Consequences (1990-2003)

By the time Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq in 1979, the Ba'ath Party had already established itself as an authoritarian regime, using oil wealth to develop and maintain a command economy. This command economy, as well as ownership of the public and oil sectors, enabled the Ba'ath party to employ a majority of the Iraqi population. The 1974 increase in oil prices gave the Iraqi state relative independence from the production capacity of the Iraqi society, thereby becoming unaccountable to it. Iraq's rentier state generated revenue from oil exports and created the "political economy of patron-client relations where personal relationships and crony capitalism were driving forces."[120] Saddam Hussein inherited this pre-existing structure of unchecked power when he became President in 1979, achieving control of both the Ba'ath Party and Iraqi society through a combination of coercion, oppression, and financial co-option. Locally, civil society was somehow subordinated to, and shaped by, the state; and regionally, Saddam Hussein championed Pan Arabism in an attempt to secure leadership of the Arab world.

In 1980, Saddam Hussein's regional agenda, and his desire to fill the geopolitical vacuum sparked by the overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, manifested itself in the invasion of Iran, which transformed into a lengthy and financially draining war (1980-1988) with devastating effects for both states and civil societies. Two years after the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein made another geopolitical error by invading Kuwait in August 1990, ushering in thirteen years of severe international economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by the UNSC (1990-2003). UN Resolution 661 required all UN member states to "prevent the importation of any goods into their territories from Iraq or Kuwait (which was under Iraqi control), [and] prohibit their nationals from shipping goods to Iraq or Kuwait or transferring funds to either country."[121] With the

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[120] Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, "Whither Iraq? Beyond Saddam, sanctions and occupation," *Third World Quarterly* 26 (2005): 612

[121] Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2010), 20

exception of medicine and, in humanitarian circumstances, food supplies,[122] Iraq was unable to import or export anything to any of the UN member states. The Iraqi economy was particularly vulnerable to these restrictions because of its heavy dependence on trade; oil exports alone constituted about sixty percent of Iraq's gross domestic product (GDP) and ninety-five percent of its foreign currency earnings.[123] In 1989, Iraq's GDP was $66.2 billion; by 1996 it had decreased to $10.8 billion.[124] UNSC Resolution 661, it was argued, was intended to coerce the Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, and promised the cessation of sanctions once Iraq complied with UNSC regulations. However, the sanctions regime was also accompanied by a forty-three day period of intensive bombing on Iraq in 1991 by American coalition forces, causing infrastructural damage of approximately $232 billion.[125] The following illustrates the bombing campaign:

> The bombing of Iraq was aimed not only at military targets but also at such assets as civilian infrastructure, power stations, transport and telecommunications networks, fertilizer plants, oil facilities, iron and steel plants, bridges, schools, hospitals, storage facilities, industrial plants and civilian buildings. And the assets that were not bombed were rendered dysfunctional because of the destruction of power generating facilities.[126]

In addition, U.S. President George H. Bush insisted that sanctions would stand for as long as Saddam Hussein was in power; and in 1994, U.S. Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, declared that "Iraqi compliance [with UNSC regulations] was not enough to lift the embargo," thereby unilaterally altering the conditions of the UNSC's ruling.[127]

Former UN Humanitarian Commissioners Denis Halliday and Hans Von Sponeck, who resigned from their posts in protest against the sanctions, both argued that the burden of the embargo fell on the shoulders on the civilians, and directly targeted the Iraqi population so that per capita income in Iraq fell from $2279 in 1984 to $627 in 1991, and to a shocking $450 in 1995.[128] Between 1991 and 1992, Martti Ahtisaari and Sadruddin Aga Khan were

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[122] United Nations Security Council (SC), Resolution 661, "The Situation between Iraq and Kuwait," August 6, 1990, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/575/11/IMG/NR057511.pdf?OpenElement
[123] Gordon, *Invisible War,* 21
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid., 89
[126] Abbas Alnasrawi, "Iraq: Economic Embargo and Predatory Rule," in *War, Hunger, and Displacement: The Origins of Humanitarian Emergencies Volume 2: Case Studies,* ed. E. Wayne Nafzinger et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 98
[127] Ismael and Ismael, "Whither Iraq," 613
[128] Ibid.

sent by UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar as special envoys to Iraq to assess the severity of the humanitarian situation. Both parties described the situation in Iraq as one of "devastation and imminent humanitarian catastrophe," with damages to water purification plants reducing access to clean water by seventy-five percent; the increase of basic staples like rice and wheat floor by 4500 percent; and the destruction of eighty-five to ninety percent of Iraq's power grid.[129] In addition, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Iraqi Country office published a report between 1999 and 2000 stating:

> Iraq's economy has been in crisis since the imposition of economic sanctions in 1990. Despite the Oil-For-Food program [a program established in 1995 under UNSC Resolution 986 allowing Iraq to sell oil to the global market in exchange for food and other humanitarian needs], the country continued to decline into poverty, particularly in the south. Food supplies continue to be inadequate in the center and south of the country; the prevalence of general malnutrition in the center and south has hardly changed. Although the rates have stabilized, this happened at an unacceptably high level.[130]

Also in 1999, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), together with the Iraqi government, released the results of a child mortality survey that showed the doubling of the mortality rate for children below five years from fifty-six deaths per a thousand live births in 1984 to a hundred and thirty-one deaths between 1994 and 1999.[131]

The sanctions regime imposed on Iraq "was unprecedented in its comprehensiveness, severity and length, and in the enormous human and economic cost which it inflicted on Iraq."[132] The sanctions decimated Iraq's economic, educational, and healthcare systems, making the government incapable of mitigating the effects of the embargo and avoiding humanitarian catastrophe.[133] The sanctions also served a very specific Western geopolitical purpose, namely the removal of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime and, by the time of the Anglo-American invasion in 2003, the sanctions regime had already crippled the Iraqi economy and fragmented Iraqi civil society.

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[129] Gordon, *Invisible War,* 21
[130] Report – Iraq Country Office, *United Nations Development Report,* 1999-2000, accessed May 28, 2016, http:// www.iq.undp.or
[131] "Iraq surveys show 'humanitarian emergency," *UNICEF*, August 12, 1999, accessed May 28, 2016, https://www.unicef.org/newsline/99pr29.htm
[132] Abbas Alnasrawi, "Iraq: economic sanctions and consequences, 1990-2000," *Third World Quarterly* 22 (2001), 217
[133] Gordon, *Invisible War,* 127

The Anglo-American Invasion of Iraq (2003) and the Post-invasion Policy of de-Ba'athification

The 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq was a geopolitical catastrophe that led to prolonged armed resistance, political turmoil, the disintegration of the Iraqi state structure, and the implementation of *muhasasa*, a political system founded on the "spoils of power along communal, ethnic, and tribal lines."[134] The invasion also involved the systematic demolition of Iraq's cultural heritage, including the looting of health, educational and cultural organizations, and the burning of historical records that personified a very clear policy of cultural cleansing.[135] "Operation Iraqi Freedom" reduced the entire Iraqi state and its institutions to rubble. A report published by the Fafo Institute for Applied Social Science noted that acute malnutrition among Iraqi children between six months and five years of age rose from four percent before the invasion to seven-and-a-half percent after a year of American occupation.[136]

The physical destruction of Iraqi state institutions during the 2003 invasion, and the ways in which the sanctions regime crippled Iraqi civil society, prompted anti-Western sentiments across the Middle East, and fueled the increasing rift between Arab governments and their populations. This rift was further intensified by the policy of De-Ba'athification: a program established in May 2003 by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq and its leader, Paul Bremer, to remove any of the Ba'ath Party's influence in the post-invasion Iraqi political structure. The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party was founded in Iraq in 1951 and instituted a permanent, totalitarian regime after the 1968 coup. By the mid-1970s, its two key figures, namely Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein, had already established "a mass-based, tightly controlled party; an ubiquitous secret police, a reorganized and Ba'athized military; and a burgeoning bureaucracy with virtually total control over society."[137] The Ba'ath Party also established a command economy under the Ba'ath socialism, implemented an industrial program, which included the extensive development of weapons, and provided education, social, and health benefits to its people. These policies, together with the purging of the military and the 1970 constitution that gave the president the power to appoint, promote, and dismiss judiciary, civil, and military personnel, gave the Ba'ath Party, and later Saddam Hussein, absolute and total control of the Iraqi state.[138] The

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[134] Gerges, *ISIS,* 8
[135] Ismael and Ismael, "Whither Iraq?" 616
[136] Ibid.
[137] Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (New York: Westview Press, 2011), 137
[138] Ibid., 147

presidency of Saddam Hussein (1979-2003) then effectively changed the Iraqi state "from a one-party state to a personal, autocratic regime dependent for security- and, increasingly, for decisions- on Saddam Hussein and his close family members and cohorts."[139] De-Ba'athification therefore included, but was not limited to, the disbanding of the Iraqi army, police and administration under CPA Order Two, and the prevention of members of the former Ba'ath Party from participating in the newly formed Shi'a-majority government. The occupation not only left political and security vacuums by dismantling the Iraqi state's apparatus, it also included the dismissal of approximately 400,000 soldiers and intelligence personnel who had previously served under Saddam Hussein's regime.[140] These policies, it was argued, attempted to "ensure the representative government in Iraq [was] not threatened by Ba'athist elements returning to power."[141]

Indeed, while there has been much discussion about the militaristic and bureaucratic dimensions of de-Ba'athification, the consequences for social cohesion and national identity are understated. De-Ba'athification also involved the deliberate and systematic annihilation of Iraq's cultural and historical heritage. Iraq's "museums have been looted with devastating efficiency, its libraries have been set ablaze, its art galleries and universities ransacked and bands of smugglers have dug and smashed their way through the many archeological sites."[142] Any trace of the Ba'athist era, including murals, statues and monuments, were defaced and torn down. In fact, approximately fifteen thousand objects were stolen from the Iraqi National Museum, while a million books from the Iraqi National Library and Archive were destroyed.[143] The demolition of Iraq's historical heritage triggered the deterioration of "the Iraqi brand of nationalism that the Ba'ath had managed to promulgate to varying degrees of success since the 1960s."[144] The Ba'ath Party, with its policies based on a combination of secular nationalism, anti-imperialism and socialism, used oil revenues to rejuvenate Iraqi folklore and popular culture.[145] Saddam Hussein's reign was characterized by fear and violence and his carefully constructed cult of personality that was built on charisma and

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[139] Ibid., 176
[140] Ibid., 270
[141] Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) No. 1, May 16, 2003, accessed February 1, 2017 www.iraqcoalition.org/regulations/6/18/10
[142] Benjamin Isakhan, "Targeting the Symbolic Dimension of Baathist Iraq: Cultural Destruction, Historical Memory, and National Identity," *Middle East Journal Of Culture & Communication* 4 (2011): 259
[143] Fernando Baez, *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books: From Ancient Sumer to Modern Iraq* (New York: Atlas & Co, 2008), 270-272
[144] Isakhan, "Targeting the Symbolic Dimension of Baathist Iraq," 260
[145] Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 249

powerful rhetoric, and appealed directly to the average Iraqi.[146] The construction of an Iraqi national identity was thus a conscious effort by the regime to unite the diverse Iraqi population behind a Ba'athist vision of an Iraqi state that aspired to be a key player in both regional and international pan-Arab politics. It is therefore important to understand that the symbolic national identity that had taken decades for the Ba'ath Party to create and consolidate came crumbling down within hours of the de-Ba'athification process, leaving detrimental effects on many attempts at a post-Ba'athist Iraqi national identity.

      The Anglo-American invasion of Iraq had a parallel program of targeting anything that symbolized the Ba'athist regime. From its onset, the 2003 invasion included a "shock and awe" campaign that left more than two hundred state buildings destroyed and many others damaged beyond repair.[147] In addition, within just a few weeks of de-Ba'athification, "an entire epoch of state-produced symbols, monuments and motifs [were] burnt, bullet ridden or torn asunder."[148] As such, de-Ba'athification was a project designed by Bremer and a group of American neo-conservatives who "were determined to oust the quasi-socialist Ba'athist state and to demonstrate not only their military might, but also their model of free-market democracy was the ultimate form of human governance."[149]

      De-Ba'athification in general, and the systematic dismantling of the Iraqi armed forces in particular, pushed a large number of former army and intelligence officers to join anti-American resistance movements in Iraq. Former Iraqi military officers, who were trained by Saddam Hussein's regime, spent about twelve years in the "Anbar Province battling both U.S. troops and Baghdad's Sh'ite-dominated security forces."[150] In addition, the 2003 anti-American resistance movement in Fallujah included a number of former Ba'athist army officials.[151] Later, former members of Saddam Hussein's army became instrumental for the realization of IS' agenda in Iraq; they currently "run three of the most crucial [IS portfolios]: security, military, and finance."[152] IS absorbed these former army and intelligence officials and troops who felt marginalized by de-Ba'athification and Nouri al-Maliki's Shi'a-majority

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[146] See for example Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Word: Political Discourse in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Adeed Dawisha, "'Identity' and Political Survival in Saddam's Iraq," *Middle East Journal* 53(1999): 553–567; Peter Mansfield, "Saddam Husain's Political Thinking: The Comparison with Nasser," in *Iraq: The Contemporary State,* p. 62-73 ed. Tim Noblock (London: Croom Helm, 1982)
[147] Baez, *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books,* 268
[148] Isakhan, "Targeting the Symbolic Dimension of Baathist Iraq," 261
[149] James Pfiffner, "US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army," *Intelligence and National Security* 25 (2010): 76-85
[150] Mark Thompson, "How Disbanding the Iraqi Army Fueled ISIS," *TIME* May 28, 2015, accessed March 27, 2017, http://time.com/3900753/isis-iraq-syria-army-united-states-military/
[151] Ibid.
[152] Isabel Coles and Ned Parker, "How Saddam's men help Islamic State rule," *Reuters* December 11, 2015, accessed March 27, 2017, http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate/

government. The former Ba'athists have thus "strengthened [IS'] spy networks and battlefield tactics and are instrumental in the survival of its self-proclaimed Caliphate."[153] In essence, de-Ba'athification had several long-term implications for the rise, growth, and survival of IS first in Iraq and then in Syria.

The origins of IS can therefore be traced back to the destruction of the Iraqi state structure by the Anglo-American invasion and occupation in 2003. States take decades to construct and improve the infrastructures and institutions that enable them to function effectively and provide public services to their civil societies. In asserting this, I am by no means insinuating the impeccable structure and nature of Saddam Hussein's regime and the policies he implemented; rather, I am stressing the preexistence of important political, social, and economic institutions in Iraq before the invasion. In 2003, American coalition forces completely obliterated these institutions within an afternoon of aerial bombardment, leaving serious physical, political, and economic implications. Destroying a state in its entirety creates a political vacuum that fosters favorable environments for jihadists to convene and strategize. As such, the greatest threat in the aftermath of intervention is a political vacuum;"[154] the absence of a legitimate political authority to mitigate competing claims for power results in anarchy and civil strife. The instability and unpredictability that follows pushes individuals to seek solidarity in social communities. Just as the Balkans descended into complete chaos after the fall of the Soviet Union, Iraq's political landscape witnessed a battle for power and authority that was "manipulated and sought along ethnic, sectarian and class lines."[155]

From the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)

While it is important to acknowledge the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime, which favored Saddam's own Tikriti tribe and exacerbated ethnic and identity-based divisions among Iraqi society, the American coalition forces thoroughly dismantled previously functioning Ba'athist social, economic, and political institutions, thereby creating a political vacuum that fostered an environment favorable for the proliferation of jihadist groups like AQI and later Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).

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[153] Ibid.
[154] Day Graham and Christopher Freeman, "Peacekeeping is the key: Rebuilding the internal security architecture of postwar Iraq," *International Affairs* 79 (2003): 300
[155] Ibid., 301

When Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian jihadist formerly involved with the Afghan mujahideen and an underground Jordanian jihadist network called *Al-Tawhid*, moved to northern Iraq in 2003, he swore allegiance to Osama bin Laden's leadership and established *al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad,* or *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* [Organization of Jihad's Base in Mesopotamia]*,* namely "Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers" or "Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)."[156] From its inception, AQI differed greatly from the agenda of al-Qaeda Central (AQC); while Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, leaders of AQC, emphasized the importance of American targets or the "far enemy," al-Zarqawi, before being killed by an American airstrike in 2006, stressed the necessity of a sectarian purge against the Shi'as and Sunnis he considered apostates.[157] In 2004, the US State Department intercepted a policy memo al-Zarqawi wrote to bin Laden and al-Zawahiri that stated:

> [The Shi'as] in our opinion are the key to change. I mean that targeting and hitting them in [their] religious, political, and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis their rabies and bare the teeth of their hidden rancor working in their breasts. If we succeed in dragging them into the area of sectarian war, it will become possible to waken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans.[158]

In contrast to al-Zarqawi, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri neither publically condemned Shi'a Iran nor attacked Shi'as in Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia. In fact, after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, both bin Laden and al-Zawahiri called on all Iraqi Muslims to unite and resist the occupation. Bin Laden said: "I call on Muslims, in general, and on the Iraqi people, in particular, to not support the Crusader US forces and their allies. Those who cooperate with the United States or its off-shoots, regardless of names and titles, are infidels and so are those who support infidel parties such as the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, and the democratic Kurdish parties and their like."[159] However, al-Zarqawi's indiscriminate targeting of Shi'as, particularly the attack on the Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib mosque, triggered a reaction from Iran against the jihadists. Al-Zarqawi's attacks also caused other radical Islamist scholars to blame AQC for not preventing his actions. Salman al-Oudah, a radical Saudi preacher, wrote to bin Laden in 2007:

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[156] Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement,* 163
[157] Ismael and Ismael, "Whither Iraq?" 616
[158] Al-Zarqawi, "Musab al-Zarqawi Letter Obtained by United States Government in Iraq"
[159] Osama bin Laden, "To Muslims in Iraq in Particular and the [Islamic] Nation [Umma] in General," *Al-Sahab* (Institute for Media Production), May 27, 2004, accessed January 31, 2017. Full text of bin Laden's message was translated by FBIS Report FEA20041227000762, December 27, 2004.

> Is Islam only about guns and war? Have your means become the end themselves? ... Many of your brethren in Egypt, Algeria and elsewhere have come to see the end road for al-Qaeda's ideology. They now realize how destructive and dangerous it is.[160]

In addition, al-Zarqawi's attack on Iraqi Sunnis also angered Sunni tribes who then decided to ally themselves with American troops and fight al-Zarqawi's forces.[161] Operation Defeat al-Qaeda in the North, effective during the spring and summer of 2008, located and destroyed a large number of AQI combatants, weapons, and explosives. Nevertheless, this defeat was temporary and the jihadists restored themselves inside American-run prisons in Iraq, including Camp Bucca, where they established networks, and where the current IS leader and self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, first identified himself as the group's leader. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, nee Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri, was born in Samarra, Iraq and is often remembered as being a quiet, shy, and pious boy.[162] After the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi helped establish *Jamaat Jaysh Ahl al-Sunnah wa-I-Jamaah* (JJASJ), a militant jihadist group that joined the *Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen* (Mujahideen Shura Council) in 2006; the Mujahideen Shura Council served as an umbrella organization that included AQI and approximately seven other jihadist groups. After al-Zarqawi's death in 2006, the Mujahideen Shura Council appointed Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajjer (also Abu Ayyub al-Masri) as the new emir and defense minister respectively. AQI and other compatible militias then merged to establish the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) on October 13, 2006. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emerged as the leader of ISI, which later became the Islamic State (IS) in 2014, after both Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajjer were killed by a joint American-Iraqi raid in 2010.

Former prisoners "compare Camp Bucca to an 'al-Qaeda school,' an institution that produced jihadists in a factory-like environment."[163] Located in Umm Qasr, Iraq, Camp Bucca was an American detention facility that housed up to twenty-four thousand Iraqi prisoners of war, many of whom were former Ba'athist officials and nationalists who worked for Saddam Hussein's government.[164] Most of the former Ba'athist officials who joined AQI and later ISI were mentored and converted by Salafi-jihadists at either Camp Bucca or Abu Ghraib. The torture, abuse, and radicalization of former Ba'athists within these US-run

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160 Gerges, *The Far Enemy,* 289-299
161 Audrey K. Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs* 94 (2015): 89
162 Gerges, *ISIS,* 133
163 Ibid.
164 Medyan Dairieh, "My Journey inside the Islamic State," *Vice News,* July 1, 2015, accessed January 31, 2017, https://news.vice.com/article/my-journey-inside-the-islamic-state

military prisons transformed them into hardliners and dedicated ISI fighters. The Iraqi government reported "that seventeen of the twenty-five most important IS leaders running the war in Iraq and Syria spent time in US-run detention facilities between 2004 and 2011."[165] Furthermore, in a December 2014 interview with Martin Chulov, former IS fighter Abu Ahmed claimed, "If there was no American prison in Iraq, there would be no IS now. Bucca was a factor. It made us all. It built our ideology."[166] Camp Bucca also provided Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi with the environment to transform from "an unknown, low-level 'foot soldier' into an ambitious leader and a member of a larger social network of Sunni militias."[167]

The post-2003 Iraqi political framework

Similar to their predecessors, namely Saddam Hussein and his Ba'athist regime, the new Iraqi ruling elite under Nouri al-Maliki's premiership (2006-2014) failed to establish an inclusive national identity and reconstruct state structures based on stable, legal foundations.[168] The post-Ba'athist regime, therefore, should bear accountability for the instability that has befallen the Iraqi state after the 2003 invasion. Indeed, while the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq caused a deep fracture in the state and civil society, the post-invasion ruling elite had the opportunity to alleviate "social conditions and strengthen national unity."[169] Former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's policies, widely described as sectarian-based, included his unwillingness to include the *Sahwa* (Arabic for Awakening) forces – Sunni tribal councils organized and funded by American occupation authorities from 2007 to 2008 – and his "conflicted relationship" with key Shi'a leaders, disenfranchised the Sunni population and left the Shi'a community divided. In addition, hundreds of Sunni candidates were disqualified in the 2010 parliamentary elections due to allegations of their pervious membership of the former Ba'ath Party. These policies, together with a deeply corrupt and inefficient government, and the repression of "Arab Spring" protestors in 2011, led to widespread dissatisfaction and resistance.[170] Nouri al-Maliki's government hijacked democratic systems and structures, including elections, political oppositions, the media and

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[165] Gerges, *ISIS,* 133
[166] Interview with Abu Ahmed in Martin Chulov, "ISIS: The Inside Story," *The Guardian,* December 11, 2014, accessed May 28, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story?CMP=share_btn_tw
[167] Gerges, *ISIS,* 133
[168] Gerges, *ISIS*, 12
[169] Ibid., 12-13
[170] Ibid.

civil society, in an effort to retain rather than defuse political power.[171] The former prime minister also undermined central state institutions by creating a "shadow state loyal to himself," thereby ensuring the concentration of both political and military power within his portfolio.[172]

The Sunni reintegration into Iraqi's political process after the invasion has been described as a "harsh readjustment."[173] Prior to 2003, the Sunni population in Iraq was considered a political majority and a numerical minority; after 2003, they became both a political *and* numerical minority. This reality caused most Sunnis to delegitimize Nouri al-Maliki's Shi'a-majority government, and attempt to assert their demands as a united Sunni front.[174] As such, the post-2003 political framework exposed significant social cleavages within the Iraqi state, which enabled Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and IS to permeate the Iraqi state system. Al-Baghdadi presented IS as the champion and defender of the disenfranchised Sunni Arab population "who feel excluded and persecuted by the Shi'a-dominated regime in Baghdad and the Alawite-led regime in Damascus."[175] Former IS spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, even "threatened not only to topple the Maliki government and to settle debts in Samarra and Baghdad, but to also push further south [and destroy Shi'a Islam's two holiest cities] Karbala *al-munajisah* [Karbala the defiled] and Najaf *al-ashrak* [Najaf the most polytheistic]."[176] In portraying IS as the sole defender of the oppressed Sunni population in Iraq and Syria, al-Baghdadi and his comrades were able to cultivate an important social constituency that supplied IS with territory and skilled fighters. At least initially, some IS fighters came from the ranks of Sunni Iraqis who felt excluded and marginalized by the post-invasion state. However, it is equally important to recognize that there presently exists no concrete evidence from Iraqi history to suggest inherent Iraqi Sunni animosity towards Iraqi Shi'as or vice versa.[177] The 2003 invasion of Iraq, the post-invasion policies, the unequal distribution of political and economic resources, and the political survival strategy of the post-invasion Iraqi government, led to the politicization of ethno-religious identities.

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[171] See for example: Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to New Authoritarianism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012)
[172] Isakhan, *The Legacy of Iraq,* 69
[173] Ronen Zeidel, "A Harsh Readjustment: The Sunnis and the Political Process in Iraq," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 12 (2008): 41
[174] Isakhan, *The Legacy of Iraq,* 99
[175] Gerges, *ISIS,* 13
[176] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani quoted in Sassan Aghlani, "The power of sacred geography in Iraq," *Chatham House,* June 18, 2014, accessed on May 28, 2016, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/14921
[177] Sluglett, "The British, the Sunnis and the Shi'is," 258

Conclusion

To fully understand the ongoing conflict in Iraq is to acknowledge that the "presence of occupying forces and troops, of private security companies and mercenaries, of international institutions and protagonists, plus the variety of political forces"[178] greatly contributed to the country's political, socio-economic, and territorial fragmentation. Orientalist and neo-Orientalist representations of the conflict as a "sectarian" or "cultural" issue sensationalize the violence, misrepresent the reality of resistance to occupation, and justify colonial invasion/occupation of Iraq. Thus, to reduce the violence in Iraq to sectarianism is to deny the fundamental role the Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq, and Nouri al-Maliki's inefficient and corrupt government, played in sparking the conflict by institutionalizing sectarianism. In addition, correlating the Iraqi conflict to a sectarian conflict effectively implies that the violence was never cultivated by the occupier, namely American coalition forces, and is instead a byproduct of the natural, internal composition of Iraqi society. Contrary to Orientalist and neo-Orientalist arguments, this sectarianization of society is caused by political, not cultural, factors. Essentially,

> Gangsters, bandits, and militia groups have been organized through the occupation and the governing parties, and political alliances have been formed with some tribal forces in the hope that they will help secure the political and social dominance of these parties. What ensure are intra-parliamentary fights for political power, jockeying for key political positions- and political murders.[179]

The violence in Iraq should therefore be understood in the context of the Anglo-American invasion and occupation, and the failure of Nouri al-Maliki's government to construct democratic and inclusive nation building policies. The invasion was driven by a naïve belief that the American coalition forces could easily overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime, enforces neoliberal democratic institutions, and "watch Iraq transform from a quasi-socialist dictatorship to a society driven by a free-market economy under the auspices of an inclusive government."[180] The failure of the invasion, occupation, and post-2003 political framework to establish an inclusive, democratic, and efficient government in Iraq has created an environment favorable for the rise of militant jihadist groups, including IS, who profit from the deep disenfranchisement and marginalization of important sectors of society. In this way,

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[178] Alnasseri, "Understanding Iraq," 77
[179] Ibid., 78
[180] Isakhan, *The Legacy of Iraq*, 225

a critical historical and postcolonial approach is useful to contextualize the current Iraqi conflict, the asymmetrical power structures, and the uneven allocation of economic, political, and social power between the occupier and the occupied. The following chapter, on the "Syrian Proxy War," uses a similar critical approach to examine how Bashar al-Assad's violent repression of "Arab Spring" protestors led to the militarization of the 2011 Syrian uprising and its descent into a full-blown proxy/civil war. Bashar al-Assad's violence against his own civilians only served to empower militant Islamist groups who, like in the Iraqi case, presented themselves as protectors of the Sunni population in Syria. In addition, the involvement of regional and global powers that support different factions of the Syrian conflict further decimates the Syrian political, economic, and social fabric.

Chapter Three
The Syrian Proxy War

Introduction

In April 2011, Bashar al-Assad unleashed a series of violent crackdowns to suppress what started as a non-violent uprising in Syria; military tanks were ordered to crush defiant cities and police forces opened fire on protestors. This crackdown rapidly militarized the non-violent Syrian uprising with Syrian security forces recognizing that their survival, in their current positions of power, was contingent on the survival of Bashar al-Assad's regime. The Syrian conflict took another turn in December 2011 when several military personnel defected from the Syrian army, thus creating an opportunity for the possible overthrow of the Assad regime; and by 2012, the uprising had transformed into a full-blown civil/proxy war. Like in Iraq, the political and social climate in Syria presented the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), later the Islamic State (IS), with an opportunity to exploit valid popular grievances and present itself as the only defenders of an oppressed Sunni population in Syria. By depicting itself as the "sole defender of authentic Islam and the sole representative of persecuted Sunnis, the group has filled a governance and ideational void"[181] created by a crisis of national identity and security.

This chapter will examine the militarization of the 2011 Syrian uprising and its descent into a full-blown proxy/civil war, as well as the expansion of IS's agenda into Syrian territory. First, this chapter will outline briefly the origins of the 2011 Syrian uprising as part of a larger "Arab Spring" revolutionary movement across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Second, it will illustrate how Bashar al-Assad's suppression of peaceful protestors, and the subsequent widespread violence, fostered an environment favorable for Abu Mohammed al-Joulani and Mullah Fawzi al-Dulaimi, two influential jihadists, to move into Syria from Iraq and establish *Jabhat al-Nusra,* or the Nusra Front – also known as *Jabhat Fateh al-Sham* (Front for Conquest of the Levant). Third, this chapter will analyze the involvement of both regional and global powers, including the United States, Britain, France, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Iran, Russia, and China, which support different factions in Syria, transforming the Syrian conflict into a geopolitical struggle for hegemony and influence.

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[181] Gerges, *ISIS,* 202

The Syrian Uprising (2011)

Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000), the former president of the Syrian Arab Republic, left his son and successor, Bashar, a legacy of disproportionate socio-economic programs that unequally, yet strategically, distributed social, economic, and political power among the Syrian people. Bashar al-Assad was then instrumental in continuing to reshape Syria's socio-economic landscape in a way that divided Syrians along both socio-economic and ethno-religious identities. Oil revenues from hydrocarbon and oil reserves sustained the Ba'athist populist dictatorship of the Assad regimes; the convergence of rent-fueled clientelism, mass employment of the population by the public sector, and the legitimization of the government by a pan-Arab ideology exempted the regime from being accountable to the Syrian people.[182] When he came to power in 1930, Hafez al-Assad established a regime that was governed by the Alawite minority, a Shi'a offshoot minority group in Syria that benefitted greatly from the French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon (1923-1943). The period of French mandate in Syria was characterized by strategic sectarian divisions, which attempted to "stifle the national independence movement."[183] Separatism "and the particularism of religious and national minorities [*politique minoritarie*] were encouraged by the granting of autonomous status to areas where such minorities formed a majority."[184] The French mandate was therefore able to cultivate friendly relations with the Alawites and the Druze, Syria's compact minority groups, by granting them territory in Jazirah and Alexandretta respectively. Minority rule and ethno-religious confessionalism remain important legacies of French colonial rule in Syria that "distinctively [favored] religious minorities [and promoted] a series of administratively isolated minority enclaves."[185] Indeed, while these legacies are important in understanding Syria's social fabric, it would be misleading to portray the 2011 Syrian uprising, as well as the subsequent conflict, as a "sectarian" or "cultural" issue triggered solely by the Alawite minority rule. The over-emphasis of the importance of ethno-religious identities in the Syrian conflict deny the indispensable role that political and social factors played in sparking the 2011 uprising. It is instead useful to acknowledge that Syria's political landscape has been dominated by political ideology of "Assadism," a form of repressive autocracy in which the government revolved around the "Assad leadership cult," where this personalization aimed at "raising the image of the president to the level of one whose wisdom

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[182] Ayse Tekdal Fildis, "Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria," *Middle East Policy,* 19 (2012), 148
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945* (Princeton N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989), 5

was beyond the comprehension of the average citizen." [186] Assadism greatly depended on members of the Assad family to take on key roles in the Syrian Ba'ath Party, the security apparatus, and various paramilitary troops. For example, Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher is currently the commander of the Republican Guard and the army's elite Fourth Armored Division. [187] In addition, emergency laws also provided both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad the tools they needed to sustain a brutal dictatorship, including giving "the military a free hand to lift protections of individual freedoms… suspend personal liberties, and consolidate the president's power." [188] These laws also allowed the military to make arrests, prohibit travel, censor writing or speech, evacuate neighborhoods, or seize property. [189] Assadism further institutionalized ethno-religious favoring by appointing members of the Assad family's own Alawite community to important military, intelligence, and political institutions. Such favoritism extended to civil education; Alawites "were awarded scholarships and traveled abroad for higher degrees, becoming doctors, engineers, lawyers, and university professors, so that in the 1990s they were strongly represented in the cadres of the state." [190] As such, Assadism failed to serve its people and forged discontentment among the Syrian civil society.

The "Arab Spring," as a widespread phenomenon, was thus an accumulation of decades of political, social, and economic adversity that reached its peak in Tunisia with the self-immolation of street-vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, who inspired millions of Arabs across the MENA to revolt against their authoritative governments. Decades of Arab political authoritarianism had failed civil society in two crucial ways. First, Arab regimes "failed to develop their economies to meet the rising expectations [and needs] of their growing and increasingly youthful populations," thereby resulting in poverty and mass unemployment among the youth. [191] Second, Arab political authoritarianism was based on a particular form of tyranny built on fear and terror, and which planted the seeds for the rise of "non-state, identity-driven radical movements." [192] Uneven economic development *and* political authoritarianism therefore sparked the 2011 uprisings across the MENA, including in Syria, where millions protested against *al-istibdad* [repression] and *al-tahmeesh* [exclusion], and called for bread, freedom, social justice and human dignity.

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[186] Hazem Kandil, "The Challenge of Restructuring: Syrian Foreign Policy," in *The Changing Middle East: A New Look At Regional Dynamics.* AUC Forum for International Affairs ed. Bahgat Korany (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 423
[187] Ibid., 424
[188] Farid N. Ghadry, "Syrian Reform: What Lies Beneath," *Middle East Quarterly* (2005), 62
[189] Ibid.
[190] Kandil, "The Challenge of Restructuring," 424
[191] Gerges, *ISIS,* 203
[192] Ibid.

Orientalist and neo-Orientalist arguments explain both the 2011 revolutionary movements and the violent transformation of the Syrian uprising as a display of "an inseparable link between Arabism and Islam," with religion being the strong, unifying factor in the revolts.[193] Former deputy director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Michael Morell, claims that the "Arab Spring was a boon to Islamic extremists across the Middle East and North Africa… From a counterterrorism perspective, the Arab Spring had turned into winter."[194] However, critical historical and postcolonialism underscores the 2011 uprisings across the MENA as neither sectarian nor religiously driven movements. The Syrian uprising, in particular, began as a *social* and *political* movement, especially in rural regions like Dara'a where the agrarian population had suffered years of severe droughts, food insecurity, and adverse neoliberal policies that drew back "welfare-enhancing economic measures"[195] that constituted important safety nets for millions of urban and rural Syrians. A report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) stated that, "by 2009, 18.2 percent of the Syrian population had fallen below the poverty line, with the rural Damascus, Idlib, Homs, Dara'a, al-Sweida and Hama governorates among the most affected."[196] Moreover, decreasing rent and increasing birth rates in Syria placed pressure on Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian regime to pursue "post-populist" policies where the state withdrew state-funded welfare programs, favored investors over the needs of the population, and created a new "crony capitalism" that exacerbated social inequality.[197] It is in this context that the Syrian uprising developed in March 2011, which later morphed into a prolonged and brutal civil/proxy war.

The Islamic State and the establishment of al-Nusra in Syria

The conflicts in Syria and Iraq fueled each other and gave IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the opportunity to revive and establish jihadist networks in both countries that "championed the grievances" of disenfranchised Sunnis. When the Syrian conflict broke out in 2011, al-Baghdadi sent a number of IS fighters, including Abu Mohammed al-Joulani and Mullah Fawzi al-Dulaimi, to Syria to set up a jihadist cell and fight the Assad regime. Al-Joulani became instrumental in the establishment of *Jabhat an-Nusrah il-ahli ash-Sham* [The

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[193] Lorella Ventura, "The 'Arab Spring' and Orientalist Stereotypes: The Role of Orientalism in the Narration of the Revolts in the Arab World," *Interventions* 19 (2017), 286

[194] Michael Morell, *The Great War of Our Time: The CIA's Fight against Terrorism – From Al Qa'ida to ISIS* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2015), 180

[195] Gerges, *ISIS,* 171

[196] Ibid., 172; see also "Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic," FAO/WFP, July 5, 2013, www.fao.org/docrep/018/aq113e/aq11e.pdf

[197] Hinnebusch, *Syria,* 3

Victory Front for the People of the Levant], also known as al-Qaeda in Syria, al-Qaeda in the Levant, or al-Nusra. While initially IS did not formally announce its participation in the Syrian conflict, it did provide al-Joulani and al-Nusra with monetary aid, skilled fighters and weapons, thereby enabling the Syrian jihadists to embed themselves into the armed rebel groups.[198] In May 2015, an audio recording released by al-Qaeda's *As-Sahab* Media asserted that:

> From the onset a decision was made to blend [al-Nusra fighters] in with the local population in a bid to avoid alerting Americans of al-Qaeda's presence in Syria – a move that subsequently allowed al-Nusra to grow, expand, and build coalitions with various Islamist factions.[199]

Yet, in 2012 al-Joulani released a statement declaring the establishment of al-Nusra in Syria in which he presented his organization as part of the Syrian mujahideen movement rather than an extension of al-Qaeda Central (AQC), or the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Al-Joulani stated that: "the appeals for the people of jihad have risen, and we could only respond to the call and to the return of our people and land from the first months of the outbreak of the [Syrian] revolution."[200] For at least a year after its institution, al-Nusra practiced *taqqiya* [disguising beliefs in instances where one can be persecuted], and relied heavily on local Syrian Sunni recruits, a few skilled Iraqi fighters, and foreign volunteer fighters."[201] Al-Nusra presented Syria as the place for religious "salvation" and the nucleus of the Islamic empire that will exist only with the "liberation" of the Levant, including modern-day Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and parts of southern Turkey.[202] In addition, it sought to demolish the Westphalian, "colonial" barriers that separate Iraq and Syria in order to build a coalition of Sunni forces that would balance Shi'a Iran's increasing influence in the Middle East, particularly its support for the governments in Baghdad and Damascus. Syria thus became an important and popular arena for the manifestation of al-Nusra's political goals, attracting fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, the Balkans, and the Caucuses.

While historically the Salafi-jihadists of Syria were stifled by Bashar al-Assad's regime, the tumult of 2011 gave these groups a new platform to advance their Salafi ideology

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[198] Gerges, *ISIS,* 176
[199] Ibid.
[200] "Al-Qaeda leader in Syria speaks to Al Jazeera," *Al Jazeera,* December 18, 2013, accessed May 28, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/12/al-qaeda-leader-syria-speaks-al-jazeera-20131218155917935989.html
[201] Gerges, *ISIS,* 176
[202] Stephen Rosiny, "The Rise and Demise of the IS Caliphate," *Middle East Policy* XXII (2015)*:* 97

and make political demands. In particular, the jihadists asserted that the Sunni population in Syria was being oppressed by an "apostate *nusayri* [Alawite] regime."[203] Reports published by the United Nations (UN) about the ongoing Syrian conflict outline the degree of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Assad regime. These include "violations of the rights to food and health, excessive use of force against protestors, arbitrary detentions, summary executions, abductions, enforced disappearance, torture, and rape."[204] In addition, the Assad regime used aerial bombardment, intensive artillery barrages, and starvation to weaken rebel cells.[205] Al-Nusra used the Assad regime's inhumane treatment of its people and, similar to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), positioned itself as the only protector of oppressed Sunnis who felt marginalized and targeted by Bashar al-Assad and his regime. As such, a majority of al-Nusra recruits came from rural provinces, like al-Hasakah, al-Raqqah, and Deir al-Zour, where unemployment and poverty rates increased from sixty percent to ninety percent after the outbreak of the conflict.[206] Unemployed and destitute individuals became perfect recruits for al-Nusra, who, according to a 2014 article by *Haaretz*, paid their fighters $400 each month, with an additional $50 per child (if they have children), and a further $100 per wife (as some fighters had more than one wife).[207] Furthermore, al-Nusra "also provided housing for homeless fighters, with heating oil and fuel for their cars covered through their control of oil fields in Deir al-Zour."[208]

      It is important to acknowledge the brief period of the ISI and al-Nusra connection as integral to the expansion of al-Nusra's goals in Syria. This one-year partnership (2012-2013) between ISI and al-Nusra was crucial in building a solid jihadist base in Syria, as well as establishing the institutions needed for the operation of jihadist activities in the region. Al-Baghdadi and the ISI leadership was central in financially and logistically supporting al-Nusra, including "al-Nusra's expansion in many towns in northern Syria, particularly in the provinces of al-Raqqah, Idlib, Deir al-Zour, and Aleppo."[209] In April 2013, al-Baghdadi publically called for the union of al-Nusra and ISI, thereby unilaterally dissolving both ISI and al-Nusra as separate entities and establishing the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In

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[203] Ibid.

[204] Azuolas Bagdonas, "Russia's Interests in the Syrian Conflict: Power, Prestige, and Profit," *European Journal of Economic and Political Science* 5 (2012): 56

[205] W. Andrew Terrill, "Iran's Strategy for Saving Assad," *The Middle East Journal* 69 (2015): 225

[206] Rim Turkmani, "ISIL, JAN and the War Economy in Syria," *Security in Transition* (London School of Economics), July 30, 2015, accessed February 8, 2017, www.securityintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ISIL-JAN-and-the-war-economy-in-Syria1.pdf

[207] Zvi Bar'el, "How the Islamic State Buys Power," *Haaretz,* September 1, 2014, accessed February 8, 2017, www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/.premium-1.613395

[208] Gerges, *ISIS,* 178

[209] Ibid*.,* 181

return, al-Joulani dismissed the merger, insisting that if "the attributed speech [by al-Baghdadi] was true, then [al-Nusra was not] consulted or issued requests."[210] Moreover, al-Joulani publicly swore allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri and AQC, who condemned al-Baghdadi's proclamation of ISIS as "a clear violation of the orders of al-Qaeda's leadership."[211] In a December 2012 interview with *Time* magazine, Abu Adnan, an al-Nusra official, claimed that al-Nusra sought to separate its goals from those of ISI stating, "[al-Nusra] are not like al-Qaeda in Iraq, we are not of them."[212] For example, al-Nusra planted a car bombing at an Air Force intelligence building in Damascus in March 2012 that left forty-four people dead. When the news media exposed the casualties as Christian civilians, al-Nusra released a statement affirming:

> We notify the *Nasarra* [the Christians] that they had not been targeted in the bombing of the Air Force Security building [in their district]. Whatever damage the district incurred was an effect caused by the aftermath of the explosion. We appeal for all to avoid living near security buildings and hotbeds of the regime.[213]

Al-Nusra also positioned itself as part of the Syrian resistance, including its willingness to work with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other jihadist groups in Syria.[214] The International Crisis Group quoted an al-Nusra leader in Deir al-Zour who claimed, "We [al-Nusra and FSA] meet almost daily. We have clear instructions from our leadership that if the FSA needs our help we should give it. We help them with IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and car bombs. Our main talent lies in bombing operations."[215] However, in an attempt to re-center IS at the nucleus of Salafi-jihadism, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014, and further declared that any jihadist

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[210] Raqqa UMC, YouTube, April 10, 2013, accessed February 8, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FdTjm4-6Lo

[211] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Testimonial to Preserve the Blood of Mujahideen in al-Sham [Greater Syria]," *pietervanostaeyen* (blog), May 3, 2014, accessed February 8, 2017, https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/05/03/dr-ayman-az-zawahiri-testimonial-to-preserve-the-blood-of-mujahideen-in-as-sham/

[212] Rania Abouzeid, "Interview with Official of Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's Islamist Militia Group," *Time*, December 25, 2012, accessed February 8, 2017, http://world.time.com/2012/12/25/interview-with-a-newly-designated-syrias-jabhat-al-nusra/

[213] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Nusra Front-Statement N.1-Bombing of Air Force Intelligence Branch in Damascus," *nationalkuwait* (blog), March 2012 [in Arabic], accessed February 8, 2017, www.nationalkuwait.com/forum/index.php?threads/229910/

[214] Sara Elizabeth Williams, "A Rebel Rift Is Brewing on Syria's Southern Front," *ViceNews*, May 25, 2014, accessed February 8, 2017, http://news.vice.com/article/a-rebel-rift-is-brewing-on-syrias-southern-front

[215] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition," *Middle East Report* 131, October 12, 2012, accessed February 8, 2017, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/tentative-jihad-syria-s-fundamentalist-opposition

group that failed to pledge allegiance to IS would be considered an enemy.[216] Still, al-Joulani managed to cultivate a network of foreign fighters that continued to spread terror to Syrian provinces, capturing the northern province of Idlib from Bashar al-Assad's security forces between March and June 2014. By doing so, al-Nusra explicitly solidified "its status as an invaluable ally to the [Syrian] revolution" and a defender of the oppressed Sunni population.[217]

As illustrated, until July 2016, al-Nusra explicitly acknowledged itself as an operative cell of al-Qaeda based in Syria; al-Nusra has henceforth rebranded itself, allegedly cutting ties with any "external entities," including IS and AQC, into *Jabhat Fateh al-Sham* or Front for the Conquest of the Levant. However, it should be acknowledged that both ISI and al-Nusra committed systematic human rights abuses in their involvement in Syria, including the deliberate killing of civilians in the village of Mab'oujeh in Hama in March 2015, and in Kobani in June 2015.[218] Humans Rights Watch also reports cases of beheadings, crucifications, and stoning for those charged with blasphemy, adultery, or treason.[219] Both ISI and al-Nusra have sexually enslaved and abused Yezidis, a minority Kurdish ethno-religious group, in places like al-Raqqah, where over 5200 Yezidi girls and women have been systematically raped, assaulted, and forced to marry IS and al-Nusra fighters.[220] Human rights abuses by both the Assad regime and Salafi-jihadist groups like ISI and al-Nusra are further exacerbated by the military and financial involvement of regional and global actors.

The Syrian Proxy War

The militarization of the Syrian conflict by regional and global powers has been detrimental to the Syrian social movement that sought change in the 2011 uprising. The ongoing Syrian conflict thus reflects a geopolitical struggle for power and influence between various regional and global powers, including the United States, Britain, France, Israel Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Iran, Russia, and China. These diverse geopolitical interests almost always greatly benefit the most extremist groups, including IS and al-Nusra, regardless of the intensions of foreign supporters. This section will outline the actions and interests of ten key players in the Syrian conflict, ultimately arguing that any military involvement in Syria

[216] Gerges, *ISIS,* 181

[217] Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda Is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria," *Foreign Policy,* May 4, 2016, accessed May 28, 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/04/al-qaeda-is-about-to-establish-an-emirate-in-northern-syria/

[218] "Syria – World Report 2016," *Human Rights Watch,* accessed February 8, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/syria

[219] Ibid.

[220] Ibid.

causes more harm than good for the Syrian populous. Foreign involvement in Syria complicates and exacerbates the conflict, leaving room for groups like IS to exploit the grievances of civil society.

The United States, Britain, France, and Israel

The United States, Britain and France have been instrumental in training, arming, and financing some of the unknown and ambiguous militant groups in Syria in an attempt to overthrow the Assad regime. Western support for the "Syrian opposition" is a puzzling concept because there exists no single, united anti-regime opposition front. Currently, there are more than fifty separate FSA groups "that have been vetted by the CIA, all of which operate in coordination with locally legitimate civil, political, and judicial bodies."[221] Moreover in 2016, the United States, the leader of the international coalition force, dropped 26,171 bombs mostly in Iraq and Syria.[222] While the United States military confirmed only thirty-six civilian deaths from its own airstrikes since the summer of 2015, independent observers consider this figure low and inaccurate since a single American airstrike on the northern Syrian town of Manbij in July 2016 killed seventy-six non-combatants.[223] In addition, Britain carried out a drone strike in Syria in August 2015 in which two of its own citizens were killed. Former British Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that this strike was purely a self-defense measure, asserting: "I am not prepared to stand here in the aftermath of a terrorist attack on our streets and have to explain to [the British Parliament] why I did not take the chance to prevent it when I could have done."[224]

Israel's role in the Syrian conflict should not be overlooked. Israel is chiefly concerned with the kind of influence Iran exerts close to Israeli borders, "both through the deployment of Iranian troops and through Tehran's extensive support for Hezbollah."[225] Israel has been particularly wary of "Iran's deployment of significant numbers of troops and Hezbollah's mobilization of thousands of fighters to support the Assad regime."[226] As a

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[221] Lister, "Al-Qaeda Is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria"
[222] Medea Benjamin, "America dropped 26,171 bombs in 2016. What a bloody end to Obama's reign," *The Guardian,* January 9, 2017, accessed February 9, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/09/america-dropped-26171-bombs-2016-obama-legacy
[223] Emma Graham-Harrison and Spencer Ackerman, "US airstrikes allegedly kill at least 73 civilians in northern Syria," *The Guardian,* July 20, 2016, accessed February 9, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/20/us-airstrike-allegedly-kills-56-civilians-in-northern-syria
[224] Christina Boyle, "U.K. forces kill British militants in Syria airstrikes, Cameron tells Parliament," *Los Angeles Times,* September 7, 2015, accessed February 9, 2017, http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-british-citizens-killed-syria-airstrike-20150907-story.html
[225] Larry Hanauer, "Israel's Interests and Options in Syria," *RAND Corporation* (2016), accessed on March 27, 2017, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE185/RAND_PE185.pdf
[226] Ibid.

result, Israel has targeted specific Syrian, Iranian, and Hezbollah targets that pose a threat to Israeli border security. For instance, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Israel's strikes on Syria in March 2017 "targeted weapons bound for Hezbollah."[227]

The Syrian proxy war is also, arguably, a "pipeline war," maintained to ensure the supply of natural gas from Qatar to Europe through Syria, which would reduce the European Union's dependence on Russia for its energy source.[228] Bashar al-Assad's signing of the $10 billion Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline deal in July 2011 threw a curveball at the West and its Arab allies, politicizing the Syrian conflict, with the West seeking to isolate energy coordination between the Russia-Iran-Iraq-Syria alliance "to the benefit of Gulf petrodollar clients/vassals linked to U.S. energy giants."[229] A potential Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline worries the West because American vessels would suffer and, more importantly, a new oil currency would circumvent the petrodollar; "Iranian gas from South Pars would be traded in an alternative basket of currencies."[230] Furthermore, a potential Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline would enhance Russia's regional and global influence.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar

It can also be argued that the Syrian conflict has become a theater for the manifestation of the geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran; Syria has become the new "ground zero for the broader Saudi campaign to re-order the region's geopolitics and manage the aftershocks of the Arab uprisings."[231] Saudi Arabia has been wary of efforts by international powers to end the Syrian conflict, perceiving foreign power initiatives as naïve about the vitality of the Assad regime. The Saudi government therefore continues to work through local, mostly Arab, channels to influence the leadership of the Syrian opposition, mitigate discord among its allies, and enhance the opposition's fighting capacity through training and weaponry.[232] Riyadh has established "a joint operations room in Istanbul with Qatar and Turkey, channeled funds through intermediaries in Lebanon's Future Movement, coordinated military training with Jordan, brokered arms shipments from Croatia, and

[227] "Israel carries out air strikes inside Syria," *Al-Jazeera* March 17, 2017, accessed March 27, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/israel-carries-air-strikes-syria-170317070831903.html
[228] Robert F. Kennedy Jr. "Syria another Pipeline War," *Eco Watch,* February 25, 2016, accessed February 9, 2017, http://www.ecowatch.com/syria-another-pipeline-war-1882180532.html
[229] Pope Escobar, "Syria: Ultimate Pipelineistan War," *Strategic Culture Foundation,* December 7, 2015, accessed February 9, 2017, http://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2015/12/07/syria-ultimate-pipelineistan-war.html
[230] Ibid.
[231] Bagdonas, "Russia's Interests in the Syrian Conflict," 67
[232] Frederic Wehrey, "The Saudi Thermidor," *Current History* 113 (2014): 345

reportedly solicited Pakistan's assistance with training."[233] Essentially, Saudi Arabia regards its support for the both the National Coalition and the FSA on the one hand, and their rival Salafi militia groups on the other hand, as one of the key tools for weakening Iranian influence in the region. In assisting with the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Saudi Arabia would in turn be depriving Iran of its primary Arab ally *and* its Syrian gateway for supplying weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon.[234]

Qatar's interests in Syria is twofold: first, Qatar supports regime change and has provided funding and military aid to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and other affiliate groups;[235] second, Qatar has a particular interest in preventing a potential Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline from coming into fruition. The Qatari government seeks to supply natural gas from Qatar to Europe through Syria.[236]

Turkey

As for Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has assumed a policy of "neo-Ottomanism," an explicit display of regional ambitions that include greater Turkish engagement with regions that were part of the former Ottoman Empire. In particular, President Erdogan's interests lie in "the continued relevance of Turkish nationalism, a long-standing element of the country's statecraft."[237] In Syria, "neo-Ottomanism" has manifested itself in Turkish support to some of the militant jihadist groups in order to defeat the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey and marginalize Syrian Kurds, particularly because these two groups share similar ideological and political objectives. Turkey remains deeply concerned about the Syrian Kurds acquiring autonomy as it might influence the Kurds in Turkey to demand a similar outcome. When the Syrian conflict first exploded in 2011, Turkey sought to bring about regime change in Syria, providing sanctuary for the FSA within its borders, and administering financial assistance to other Syrian insurgents.[238] The porous Turkish border also provided easy access for militant Salafis to enter Syria. However after the recent attacks on Turkey by IS, particularly the 2016 bombing of Sultanahmet Square in Istanbul that killed twelve people, the Erdogan government has been committed to

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[233] Ibid., 345

[234] Ted Galen Carpenter, "Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implications," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 24 (2013), 13

[235] Ibid.

[236] Pope Escobar, "Syria: Ultimate Pipelineistan War," *Strategic Culture Foundation,* December 7, 2015, accessed February 9, 2017, http://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2015/12/07/syria-ultimate-pipelineistan-war.html

[237] Nick Danforth, "Turkey's New Maps Are Reclaiming the Ottoman Empire," *Foreign Policy,* October 23, 2016, accessed February 9, 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/23/turkeys-religious-nationalists-want-ottoman-borders-iraq-erdogan/

[238] Carpenter, "Tangled Web," 5

combatting IS, with Turkish tank and artillery strikes killing approximately two hundred IS fighters in Iraq and Syria.[239]

Iran

Iran continues to be portrayed by both Western and Middle Eastern states as one of the main sources of problems in the region, and the world's largest sponsor of terrorism.[240] Iran's geography, and the fact that its eastern and western borders are blocked off, "means that any Iranian effort to escape its confinement prompts accusations of expansionism or imperialism."[241] Iran's isolation, and its substantial economic and strategic interests, has therefore driven Tehran towards ensuring the survival of the Assad regime. In particular, Iran fears the replacement of the current Ba'athist government with a powerful anti-Shi'a Islamist regime, like the one currently dominating the Syrian opposition.[242] Both IS and al-Nusra have proven to be consistently hostile to Iran, and have explicitly expressed their animosity towards the Shi'a population through their attacks on Shi'a shrines, mosques, and provinces. Had Bashar al-Assad been overthrown earlier in the conflict, a Saudi-backed, Sunni-led regime would have probably come to power, establishing itself as Iran's committed enemy. Iran therefore continues to support Bashar al-Assad and his regime, "acknowledging that it sends its Revolutionary Guards to train a new pro-regime militia force."[243] Furthermore, Iranian support for the Assad regime has traditionally stemmed from its desire to keep Syria as an open channel for the transport of weapons, agents, and advisors for Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon. Syria is currently a major transit point for Iranian support into Lebanon; losing this avenue would be a huge geostrategic blow for Tehran. Moreover, the strategic depth of Syria for postrevolutionary Iran is worth noticing. Syria has been a strategic ally to Tehran when most Arab conservative regimes and Israel were not friends of Tehran over the past three decades.

Russia and China

Lastly, Russian, and to some extent Chinese, interests lie with the survival of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Russia has "actively resisted most attempts to hike up international pressure on the regime at the United Nations" by vetoing three United Nations Security

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239 Ibid., 6
240 Shireen Hunter, "Iran's Geopolitical Predicament and its Consequences," *LobeLog* March 7, 2017, accessed March 27, 2017, https://lobelog.com/irans-geopolitical-predicament-and-its-consequences/
241 Ibid.
242 Terrill, "Iran's Strategy for Saving Assad," 224
243 Jane Kinninmont, "The Syrian Conflict and the Geopolitics of the Region," *Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House,* April 2014, accessed February 9, 2017, http://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/anuari/anuari-2014/Kinninmont_Syria_Conflict_geopolitics_region__IEMed_yearbook_2014_EN.pdf

Council (UNSC) resolutions on Syria, thereby hindering an effective imposition of comprehensive economic sanctions and restricting any proposal for "humanitarian intervention."[244] In effect, the Russian government has more or less successfully sheltered the Assad regime from facing international consequences. In addition, China was Syria's largest trading partner in 2011, with Syrian exports into China amounting to approximately $2.4 billion.[245] It has been argued that the Russian and Chinese response to the Syrian conflict is thoroughly shaped by the 2011 intervention in Libya, where NATO forces over-stepped their UN-approved mandate and unilaterally ousted Muammar Gaddafi. Russia has also had a long-established economic and strategic relationship with both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. In the past, "the Soviet Union supplied Damascus with generous amounts of economic and military aid throughout the Cold War, and that relationship has persisted since the collapse of the USSR."[246] It is also worth noting two broad strategic interests for Russia's support of the Assad regime. First, Russia wants to balance American global hegemony and re-establish itself as a powerful global actor, as illustrated in its actions at the Security Council. Second, Russia has a vested interest in preserving its remaining footholds in Syria and Iran, which mark fundamental geostrategic locations in the region.[247] If Syria and, relatedly, Iran were compromised, Russian influence would be diminished in the Middle East. However, more recently, Russian interests took another turn as it launched a joint airstrike with Turkey against IS targets in the Syrian town of al-Bab.[248] Russian spokesman, Lt-Gen Sergei Rudskoi, stated that "the estimate of the first strikes against IS terrorists has shown that the joint actions of the Russian and Turkish aviation groups were highly effective."[249] The January 2017 airstrikes appear to be Russia's first support for the Turkish anti-IS campaign on the ground.

Conclusion

The ongoing Syrian conflict, including the human rights abuses conducted by the Assad regime, IS, al-Nusra and other militant groups, and the mass civilian casualties perpetrated by regional and global powers, must be understood in the context of decades of brutal repression by the Syrian regime, the 2011 revolutionary uprisings across the MENA,

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[244] Bagdonas, "Russia's Interests in the Syrian Conflict," 56
[245] Carpenter, "Tangled Web," 9
[246] Benedetta Berti and Jonathan Paris. "Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics, Fragmentation, and the Syrian Civil War." *Strategic Assessment* 16 (2014), 26
[247] Wehrey, "The Saudi Thermidor," 345
[248] "Syria conflict: Russia and Turkey 'in first joint air strikes on IS,' *BBC News,* January 18, 2017, accessed February 9, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38667895
[249] Ibid.

and foreign interests. Together, these factors contribute to Syria's territorial, political, and socio-economic fragmentation. To reduce the Syrian conflict to sectarianism is to neglect the importance of the fierce struggle of political and economic power between several state and non-state interest groups. Only through a critical historical and postcolonial lens can we fully contextualize and comprehend decades of asymmetrical political structures during both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad's regimes, and the unequal distribution of economic and socio-political resources among the Syrian populous. Furthermore, the transformation of the 2011 Syrian uprising into a devastating war of all against all created an environment favorable for the establishment of IS and al-Nusra in Syria. In addition, critical postcolonialism and political economy analyses are increasingly relevant in weaving through the labyrinth of competing economic and political interests that remain fundamental driving forces for state and sub-state involvement in the Syrian geopolitical struggle. These competing interests and the lack of a clear direction for all parties involved have provided IS and al-Nusra with the opportunity to extent their reach in Syria, and carefully weave their Salafi-jihadist ideology into their political goals.

The following chapter, on "Militant Wahhabism and Salafism," will explore the history of Wahhabism as a particular interpretation of the Hanbali Sunni Islamic school of thought. The evolution of Wahhabism and Salafism as puritanical expressions of ultraconservative readings of religious texts continues to establish a strong ideological force among IS followers, recruits, and supporters. These particular interpretations are also used by IS to validate violent and inhumane actions towards non-Muslims and both Shi'a and Sunni communities in Iraq and Syria who they consider "apostates." As such, a closer look at the genealogy of Wahhabism is important in understanding the deeper ideological foundations of the Islamic State.

<div align="center">

Chapter Four
Militant Wahhabism and Salafism

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Introduction

Wahhabism, as part of the Sunni, Hanbali School of Islamic thought, has been characterized as an ultraconservative, fundamentalist, and puritanical movement that seeks to restore a "pure, monotheistic" vision of Islam.[250] Wahhabism can be traced back to its founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), a Muslim cleric from Najd in central Arabia, who, together with his *Kitab al-Tawhid,* or Book of Monotheism, called for a complete purification of the Islamic faith, and developed important ideas that contemporary Wahhabis still hold true.[251] It has also been argued that the Islamic State (IS) continues to borrow its ideological foundation from the teachings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, whose ideas included the concentration of human efforts on praising the oneness of God [*tawhid*], the abstention from polytheism and idolatry [*shirk*], and the denouncing of those who do not share similar beliefs as apostates [*takfir*].[252] In 2013, the European Parliament identified Wahhabism as the main source of global jihadism; and in September 2014, a *New York Times* article explained that:

> [The Islamic States'] ruthless creed has clear roots in the eighteenth-century Arabian Peninsula. It was there that the Saud clan formed an alliance with the puritanical scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and, as they conquered the warring tribes of the desert, his austere interpretation of Islam became the foundation of the Saudi state.[253]

Some scholars, like Marcis and Al-Ibrahim, therefore draw a direct link between the ideological foundation behind IS' intolerance, xenophobia and bloodshed, and the theology of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. IS' growth and expansion into Iraq and Syria, as well as its influence beyond the Middle East, compels us to delve into the historical roots and evolution of Wahhabism in order to understand the ideas and concepts that shape the ambitions and objectives of IS. This chapter will therefore explore the history of Wahhabism as a particular interpretation of the Hanbali school of Islamic thought in order to determine the extent of Ibn

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[250] Bader Al-Ibrahim, "ISIS, Wahhabism and Takfir," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 8 (2015), 408

[251] Jeffrey R. Macris, "Investigating the ties between Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, early Wahhabism, and ISIS," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 7 (2016), 240

[252] Ibid.

[253] David D. Kirkpatrick, "ISIS' Harsh Brand of Islam is Rooted in Austere Saudi Creed," *New York Times,* September 24, 2014, accessed February 13, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/isis-abu-bakr-baghdadi-caliph-wahhabi.html?_r=0

Abd al-Wahhab's influence on IS, and demonstrate the level of difference within the Islamic faith. This will be done in four parts. First, this chapter will outline a brief history of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, his theological influencers, and the particular socio-political environment that sparked his desire to "purify" Islam. Second, this chapter will explain the connection between the House of Saud and the ideas of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and highlight the various ways in which modern-day Saudi Arabia actively exports the teachings of Wahhabism to the rest of the world. Third, this chapter will examine the important Wahhabi concepts of *takfir* [excommunication] and *wala wal baraa* [loyalty to Islam and rejection of un-Islamic practices] in order to analyze how they contribute greatly to IS' ideological pool. This chapter will then conclude by demonstrating that IS's call for an Islamic "state" is a minority position whose defense is not straight-forward for much of Islam.

Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the History of Wahhabism

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), the founder of Wahhabism, was a Sunni scholar from Najd, central Arabia, who was primarily troubled by people attributing divine status to saints and carrying out idolatrous rituals at their gravesites. He firmly believed in every man and woman dedicating their entire lives to the study of the Qur'an and *hadith* [a collection of traditions containing the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad or his companions] in order to emulate the true *Sunnah* [verbally transmitted record of the teachings and sayings of the Prophet] of Prophet Muhammad and his companions.[254] Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was heavily influenced by the teachings of Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), a controversial Sunni Muslim theologian and member of the Hanbali school of thought, who is still recognized as one of the great medieval Muslim thinkers. Ibn Taymiyyah implored his followers to revert to the origins of Islam, namely the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, thereby establishing a narrow definition of "pure faith" that would later become embedded in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings. Ibn Taymiyyah preached Salafism, one of the fastest growing brands of puritanical Islam, which

> Preaches the total rejection of religious innovations [*bid'a*] and a return to the observance of Sunni orthodoxy, the liberal adherence to Qur'anic injunctions, the Prophet's traditions [*Sunnah*] and the consensus of the pious predecessors [*al-salaf al-salih*] who are revered for learning Islam directly from the Prophet Muhammad and are thus epitomized as followers of pristine Islam. [255]

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[254] Abdel Bari Atawn, *Islamic State: the digital caliphate* (London: Saqi Books, 2015), 210
[255] Abdulbasit Kassim, "Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of jihad-Salafism and the Ideology of Boko Haram," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 16 (2015), 175

This desire to return to the "origins" of Islam is essentially the core of Salafism that finds its most recent manifestation in IS. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab believed that the first three generations of Muslims followed the pure and correct path of Islam; he based this belief on Prophet Muhammad's saying, as reported in a *hadith,* "The best of people is my generation, then those that come after them, then those that come after them."256 Both Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab also believed that Prophet Muhammad's time in Medina was the ideal model of society, thereby insisting on the necessity of returning to this time, and rejected Sufism and Shi'ism as *bid'a* [unorthodox innovation] in the process. Furthermore, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab denounced the "decorous, arty, tobacco smoking, hashish imbibing, drum pounding Egyptian and Ottoman nobility who travelled across Arabia to pray at Mecca."257 His idea of "absolute *tawhid* [monotheism]" led him to openly condemn all types of *shirk* [polytheism] that were practiced by some Muslims. In *Kashf Ash-Shubuhaat* [Removal of the Doubts], Ibn Abd al-Wahhab affirms that *shirk* [polytheism] "practices in his time had expanded to include many Muslims, pointing specifically at most Shi'a practices of praising Prophet Muhammad's family, and Sufi customs of commemorating saints.258 As such, "by considering the veneration of trees, rocks, graves, sacred sites as pre-Islamic customs, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab denounced idolatry and all other sorts of requests for intercession that caused Muslims to deviate from the belief of God as the absolute sovereign."259 Ibn Abd al-Wahhab therefore called for the extermination of these customs as a manifestation of *shirk* [polytheism]*,* urging his followers to fight against the *kuffars* [infidels] until they committed themselves towards *tawhid* [monotheism].260 Ibn Abd al-Wahhab also interpreted *jihad* [struggle] in a way that permits Muslim believers to fight against those who accepted Islam and then explicitly expressed their enmity towards the faith arguing, "All other wars are self-defense fought with forbearance at the breaching of the rules' of the justified wars."261 In this way, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab interpreted a more narrow and strict understanding of *tawhid* [monotheism] and *shirk* [polytheism]*,* and adopted a more ultraconservative and puritanical outlook on Islam.

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256 Quoted in Ibid.

257 Steven Coll in Alastair Crooke, "You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia," *Huffington Post,* August 27, 2014, accessed May 28, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.htmlv

258 Tarik K. Firro, "The Political Context of Early Wahhabi Discourse of Takfir, *Middle Eastern Studies* 49 (2013), 771

259 Ibid.

260 Ibid.

261 Ibid., 773

The House of Saud-Wahhabi Connection and the Making of the Saudi State

Naturally, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's views threatened both the clergy and the local aristocracy of Najd who feared that any interference with popular religious rituals would upset social stability and spark turmoil. However, in time, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab found an ally in Muhammad ibn Saud (1710-1765), a tribal chief of Najd, who supported his fundamentalist ideas, and who saw how Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's "teachings might challenge contemporary Arab values and culture, and become an instrument of power, particularly as it entailed *jihad* [struggle] against those who would not submit to its central requirements."[262] In 1745, Ibn Saud and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab swore an oath to each other, agreeing to work together to conquer the Arabian Peninsula, which was still part of the Ottoman Empire, to establish a kingdom based on Wahhabi beliefs.[263] In his book, *Unwan Al-Majd Fi Tarikh Najd* [The Sign of Honor in the History of Najd], Uthman ibn Bishr, a prominent historian of the first Saudi state, writes the following about the oath:

> Emir Mohammad ibn Saud told Sheikh Ibn Abd al-Wahhab: "I [promise you] a land better than yours, and [I promise you] glory and grace." To which the sheikh replied: "And [I promise you] glory, empowerment, and a manifested victory. And this is the word of *tawhid* [monotheism] for which all messengers called. Those who hold on to it, work by it and support it will govern the land and the people. As you see, Najd and its surrounding territories are drowning in polytheism, ignorance, division, and inner conflict, thus I hope you, and your offspring after you, would be an *Imam* [religious leader] whom Muslims will gather.[264]

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab envisioned a power-sharing state structure between the sheikh (or religious leader) and the emir (or king), in which "the sheikh would manage religious affairs and the emir would manage political affairs, without invalidating each other's spheres of responsibility."[265] Essentially, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's state building initiative comprised of an alliance between the spiritual authority and the political authority, "where the former gives legitimacy to the latter, and the latter gives the former the ability to extend its influence and spread its ideas in the public domain without any competition."[266] The powerful alliance between Ibn Saud and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab led to the conquering of many Arabian territories and, by 1803, the Saud family controlled the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. In 1812, the

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[262] Atawn, *Islamic State*, 210

[263] Ibid., 212

[264] Uthman ibn Bishr, *Unwan al-Majd fi Tarikh Najd [The Sign of Honor in the History of Najd]* (Riyadh: Wazat al-Ma`arif al-Saudiyah, 1983), 24

[265] Al-Ibrahim, "ISIS, Wahhabism and Takfir," 410

[266] Ibid.

Ottomans, threatened by the Saud family's rapid expansion, invaded the Arabian Peninsula and reclaimed control until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. After the war, the Saud family, now under the leadership of Abdulaziz bin Abdul-Rahman al-Saud, "forcibly united religiously diverse tribes, fighting fifty-two battles in the process,"[267] and established modern-day Saudi Arabia in 1932. Nevertheless, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's power-sharing vision between the political and religious authorities for the Saudi state was never fully realized; instead, the *ulema* [clergy] only provided the state with legitimacy without being a true partner in governance, and the state rallied for the purpose of unifying the Arabian Peninsula.[268]

Beginning in the 1930s as a blatant effort to consolidate its position as the leader of the global Muslim community, the House of Saud began exporting an "official" brand of state-sponsored Wahhabism across the world.[269] Geopolitical power considerations, "including political and religious rivalry with Iran and other contenders for the 'leadership of the Muslim world' as well as the need to placate internal religious dissent," provided the main rationale for the kingdom's support of missionary activities.[270] In the 1970s, the kingdom used oil revenues, particularly those coming from the large influx of petrodollars, to spread Wahhabism to different parts of the world, simultaneously creating a movement that transcends national and ethnic divisions *and* actively reducing the number of voices within the Islamic faith. A new Saudi cultural offensive manifested itself in *madrassas* [Islamic schools] that distributed Wahhabi translations of the Qur'an to communities throughout the Middle East, Africa, Indonesia, the United States, and Europe.[271] Saudi-sponsored *madrassas* provide free education to areas with little-to-no state-funded education, making them the only available source of literacy for students coming from impoverished social backgrounds.[272] In addition, between 1982 and 2005, King Fahd spent a total of $87 billion of state funding on 210 Islamic centers, 1500 mosques, 202 colleges, and 2000 *madrassas* abroad, to countries like Kenya, Pakistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, and Nigeria.[273] Indeed, not all Saudi-financed *madrassas* produce graduates who are militant, anti-Western, or fanatical; some *madrassas,*

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[267] Atawn, *Islamic State*, 210

[268] Al-Ibrahim, "ISIS, Wahhabism and Takfir," 411

[269] Karen Armstrong, "The deep roots of Islamic state: Wahhabism and how Saudi Arabia exported the main source of global terrorism," *New Statesman,* November 27, 2014, accessed May 28, 2016, http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2014/11/wahhabism-isis-how-saudi-arabia-exported-main-source-global-terrorism

[270] Michaela Prokop, "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *International Affairs* 79 (2003), 84

[271] Armstrong, "The deep roots of Islamic state"

[272] Ibid.

[273] Atawn, *Islamic State*, 230

like those on the Pakistani-Afghani border, "are less concerned with religious scholarship than with preaching a distorted version of *jihad* [where graduates] are given particular training and ideological preparation, and become tools in the conflict in Afghanistan, against the Hindus in Kashmir or in other locations where Muslims are 'threatened.'"[274]

Wahhabism and the Islamic State

In his famous *Kitab al-Tawhid* [Book of Monotheism], Ibn Abd al-Wahhab widely cites the Qur'an and *hadith* to construct the fundamental components of his Wahhabi doctrine. Important themes from *Kitab al-Tawhid* include the belief in the oneness of God and the worship of God alone; the avoidance of any and all types of polytheism; and the prevention of statues or graves becoming sites of pilgrimage that encourage people to attribute divine status to human beings.[275] It has been argued that IS heavily borrows its ideological foundation from Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine, particularly his understanding of *takfir* [the practice of excommunication], where one Muslim declares a non-Muslim an apostate or an unbeliever.[276] *Takfir* remains an essential aspect of the Wahhabi doctrine, which was used by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab as a weapon against his political opponents, and remains a useful tool for IS to mobilize and rally its members against those who oppose their agenda. There is also a deep connection between the declaration of *takfir* and combat, where "the *takfir* of the people necessitates fighting them until they submit to *tawhid* [the oneness of God]"[277] as interpreted and presented by a particular state or non-state entity. In addition, Wahhabism has greatly contributed the concept of *wala wal baraa* [loyalty to Islam and rejection of un-Islamic practices] to IS' ideological foundation. Although this concept exists in classical Salafism as preached by Ibn Taymiyyah and other early scholars, it is "interpreted and promoted more extremely by Wahhabi clerics."[278] Accordingly, *wala wal baraa* obliges Muslims to fully and actively reject both un-Islamic practices and non-Muslims. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab is reported to have said that one's "Islam cannot be sound, even if [he/she] adheres to the oneness of God and worshiped none but God, without enmity to the polytheists and

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274 Prokop, "Saudi Arabia," 86

275 Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab, *Kitab al Tauhid* (Houston, TX: Dar-us-Salaam Publications, undated), accessed February 15, 2017, http://www.islambasics.com

276 Al-Ibrahim, "ISIS, Wahhabism and Takfir," 415

277 Ibid., 413

278 Hassan Hassan, "The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* (2016): 5

showing them hate and hostility."[279] This idea manifested itself in 1802, where Wahhabi forces raided the holy Shi'a city of Karbala and destroyed the shrine of Imam Husayn, Prophet Muhammad's grandson and the son of Ali ibn Abi Talib, killing thousands of Shi'a men, women and children in the process. In his documentation of the attack, Osman ibn Bashr Najdi, a historian of the first Saudi state, quoted Abd al-Aziz ibn Muhammad (the second ruler of the first Saudi state) who gloated, "We took Karbala and slaughtered and took its people (as slaves), then praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, and we do not apologize for that and say: 'And to the unbelievers: the same treatment.'"[280]

IS has actively adapted the principles of *takfir* and *wala wal baraa* by systematically targeting those Muslims whom they deem sinful and disobedient to the Islamic criteria of *tawhid* [monotheism]. It is reported that the former leader of IS Abu Omar al-Baghdadi echoed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's claim that the belief in the oneness of God was insufficient to render an individual a true Muslim and instead declared, "A generation of young men [have been] trained based on the forgotten doctrine of loyalty and disavowal."[281] According to this interpretation, a "true" believer is also one who actively rejects and destroys any other subjects of worship. In addition, IS' online magazine *Dabiq* contains certain teachings that provide the necessary theological tools for the groups campaign against "apostates," particularly the Shi'a who are often referred to by the derogatory term *rafidah* [those who reject]. In its thirteenth issue, *Dabiq* stated:

> The *rafidah* hate Islam just as the Jews hate Christianity. They did not enter Islam longing for Allah or fearing Him, rather out of spite for the people of Islam and so as to inflict harm upon them. Their prayers do not exceed their ears. Indeed, Ali burned them alive and banished them to other lands. Amongst them was Abdullah ibn Saba, a Jew from the Jews of Sana'a, who was banished to Sabat.[282]

Dabiq adds:

> *Rafidah* comes from the word *rafada* meaning to reject. They [the Shi'a] were named so when they came to Zayd ibn Ali ibn Husayn ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 122 AH) and asked him to declare *bara'ah* [disavowal] to Abu Bakr and Umar in exchange for their support. He refused to do so and instead said, "May Allah have mercy upon them." [The Shi'a] told him, "We then reject you." Henceforth, they were called the rejecters.

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[279] Mohammed bin Saeed al-Qahtani, *Min mafaheem aqidat al-salaf al-salih, al-wala wal baraa fil Islam* [The Islamic concept of allegiance and disavowal as preached by the early noble generations of Muslims] (Mecca, Saudi Arabia: Tayba Publishers, 2014), 10
[280] Osman Ibn Bishr Najdi on the massacre of Karbala 1802 as quoted in Crooke, "You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia"
[281] Crooke, "You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia"
[282] "The Islamic State's (ISIS, ISIL) Magazine" *Dabiq* Issue 13 accessed from *The Clarion Project,* September 10, 2014, accessed June 02, 2016, http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq, 33

> The scholars called them so because the *rafidah* rejected the *imamah* [leadership] of Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, because they rejected the *sahabah* [the Prophet's close companions], because they rejected the *Sunnah* [the Prophet's tradition], and because they essentially rejected the Qur'an and the religion of Islam.[283]

To further support this claim, *Dabiq* refers to a *hadith* conveyed by al-Bukhari where Prophet Muhammad allegedly said,

> It makes no difference to me whether I were to pray behind a *jahmi* [followers of Jahmi ibn Safwan (d. 746) who was declared an unbeliever by early *hadith* scholars including al-Bukhari] or *rafidi* [rejecters] or behind a Jew or a Christian. They are not to be greeted with *salam* [peace]. Their ills are not to be paid a sick visit. They are not to be married. Their funerals are not to be attended. The meat they slaughter is not to be eaten.[284]

As such, just as Wahhabism presented itself as a "correction to widespread *jahiliyyah* [ignorance]" and declared anyone who opposed them an infidel, IS has also been able to narrowly define who is considered a "true" believer, drawing a fine line between *Dar al-Islam* [House/Abode of Peace] and *Dar al-Kufr* [House/Abode of Unbelievers].[285]

Indeed, there is an undeniable connection between the early ideas of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine and the ideological foundations of IS. Both phenomena involve violence and compulsion to achieve desired political goals, and call "upon the faithful to return to what they believe to be the practices of the original centuries of Islam."[286] Furthermore, both IS and the early teachings of Wahhabism feature an extremely narrow definitions of observing the oneness of God and the declaration of those who do not share similar beliefs as apostates. However, these two phenomena are far from synonymous. For one, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings are silent on the idea of restoring the Islamic caliphate/state, which marks the primary goal of IS today. It is therefore important to examine IS and its claim to an Islamic "state" in the postcolonial and contemporary context.

The Islamic "state" as an "impossible state"[287]

IS' discourse of "return to the Islamic tradition is a modern response to the crisis of Muslim societies in postcolonial era."[288] It "does not represent the tradition, it reinvents the

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[283] Ibid.
[284] Ibid.
[285] Al-Ibrahim, "ISIS, Wahhabism and Takfir," 413
[286] Macris, "Investigating the ties between Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, early Wahhabism, and ISIS," 240
[287] Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013)
[288] Mahdavi, "Muslims and Modernities," 57.

tradition."[289] The Islamist discourse of "Islamic state", or Islamism itself, "is not a purely religious phenomenon."[290] It is the "product of modern European colonialism in the Muslim world and the failure of the modern nation-state to accommodate protest movements in their political systems."[291] In other words, as Abu-Rabi' argues, while "Islamism was initially established by charismatic religious leaders who, more or less, had a well-defined mission,"[292] we must contextualize the Islamist claim of an Islamic "state" in the contemporary socio-political context. Islamism must therefore be understood "in the context of massive social, economic, political, and structural transformations initiated by modernity since the inception of imperialism."[293] In the case of IS, as discussed in previous chapters, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, post-invasion/occupation policies, and the Syrian proxy war set the stage for the rise and revival of the puritanical militant discourse and politics of Islamic state in Iraq and Syria.

IS is a militant expression of an ultraconservative puritanical reading of Wahhabism that seeks to "return" to the perceived "origins" of Islam, and establish an Islamic state. After the declaration of an Islamic caliphate in 2014, IS published an official document entitled "This is the Promise of Allah," which stated,

> Here the flag of the Islamic State, the flag of *tawhid* [monotheism], rises and flutters. Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyala. Beneath it, the walls of the *tawaghit* [plural of *taghut*, "false idols," referring to un-Islamic rulers] have been demolished, their flags have fallen, and their borders have been destroyed. Their soldiers are either killed, imprisoned, or defeated. The Muslims are honoured. The *kuffar* [infidels] are disgraced. *Ahlus- Sunnah* [the Sunnis] are masters and are esteemed. The people of *bid'ah* [heresy] are humiliated. The *hudud* [Sharia penalties] are implemented – the *hudud* of Allah – all of them. The frontlines are defended. Crosses and graves are demolished. Prisoners are released by the edge of the sword. The people in the lands of the State move about for their livelihood and journeys, feeling safe regarding their lives and wealth. *Wulat* [plural of *wali* or "governors"] and judges have been appointed. *Jizyah* [a tax imposed on *kuffar*] has been enforced. *Fay'* [money taken from the *kuffar* without battle] and *zakat* [obligatory alms] have been collected. Courts have been established to resolve disputes and complaints. Evil has been removed. Lessons and classes have been held in the *masajid* [plural of *masjid*] and, by the grace of Allah, the religion has become completely for Allah.[294]

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[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' (2004, 17), quoted in Mahdavi, "Muslims and Modernities," 57

[291] Ibid.
[292] Ibid.
[293] Ibid.
[294] IS declaration of Islamic caliphate, "This is the Promise of Allah," 2014, accessed February 22, 2017, https://ia902505.us.archive.org/28/items/poa_25984/EN.pdf

In addition, the document proclaimed,

> We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of *khilafah* [caliphate], it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the *khalifah Ibrahim* [Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi] and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the *khilafah's* authority and arrival of its troops to their areas […] It is not permissible for a single person of you who believes in Allah to sleep without having *wala* [loyalty] to the *khalifah*.295

Furthermore, in a 2015 statement, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi urged the *ummah* [Muslim community] to join in the fight for the restoration of the Islamic caliphate. Al-Baghdadi said:

> So if he obeys [our call for jihad], then for him is good, salvation, success, nearness to Allah, and the attainment of His pleasure, and if he disobeys, then for him is destruction, loss, and the attainment of Allah's anger and wrath. Indeed, every Muslim is intended by this war. And he is obliged to defend the religion of Allah and His *shari'ah* [Islamic law] and to support the oppressed men, women, and children, for this war is every Muslim's war.296

IS's proclamation of an Islamic "state" has also been mirrored in a 2015 *Foreign Affairs* article by Stephen Walt, a notable realist, in which he encourages American policymakers to treat IS as a state in formation rather than a more radical threat to the organizing principles of the state-system. Walt describes IS as the latest manifestation of state-building revolutionaries, "strikingly similar [to] regimes that emerged during the French, Russian, Chinese, Cuban, Cambodian, and Iranian revolutions."297 Walt categorizes IS as a "revolutionary state" because of how it portrays its opponents; IS describes the West as innately hostile, and Arab and Muslim governments as antithetical to Islam's "true nature." Walt claims that, much like other revolutionary movements throughout history, IS preaches inevitable victory to its audience, and its leaders "believe their fundamental message applies to the entire Muslim world and beyond."298 However, as Adib-Moghaddam illustrates, Walt's argument is grounded on three fundamentally flawed fallacies. First, Walt wrongfully assumes that IS "has a mass following in the Arab and Muslim world and that it [functions]

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295 Ibid.
296 Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Speech with English subtitles," filmed July 4, 2014. YouTube video, 5:54. Published September 29, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOiN9boAmoI.
297 Stephen Walt, "ISIS as a Revolutionary State: New Twist on an Old Story." *Foreign Affairs,* November/December 2015, accessed May 28, 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/isis-revolutionary-state
298 Ibid.

as a normal 'country' accepted by the populace,"[299] second, this arguments makes an uncomfortable comparison between the arbitrary violence and ethnic cleansing propagated by IS with the violence emerging from revolutionary movements; and third, Walt fails to acknowledge that revolutionary states in Russia, Iran, Cambodia, Cuba, and China emerged from popular movements and were supported by large segments of society.[300] The discourse about IS forming a territorial state, as expressed by the IS leadership, can therefore also be found in the works of Western observers like Walt.

However, as Wael Hallaq asserts, an Islamic "state" in theory is essentially an oxymoron and an "impossible state."[301] Muslim reformists, post-Islamist scholars and movements have already challenged "the authenticity, possibility and the religious foundations of Islamic state." [302] The Islamic "state" is an idea "borrowed from the experiences of Western [nation-states], and therefore, [has] no basis in the historical experiences of the Muslim world."[303] The imagined "golden age" of Islam remains un-replicable because of the lack of revelation after the death of the Prophet, the lack of divine guidance in the present-day, and the fundamental and gradual transformation of social, political, and economic organization that make up contemporary Muslim-majority societies.[304] Similarly, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im argues that an Islamic "state" is a postcolonial invention that has no religious foundation; it is a secular entity ruled by Islamist elites who govern based on their *human* interpretation of the Islamic faith.[305] As such, Islamist elites do not act based on some abstract religious dogmas.[306] For instance, the IS leadership is actively involved in integrating Prophet Muhammad's "traditions into Islamic jurisprudence, changing terms from 'optional' and 'recommended' to 'obligatory' and 'duty.'"[307] In changing certain traditional Islamic discourses, IS reshapes the reality of both the populations it governs, and those it seeks to recruit. The group's objectives, illustrated by its battle cry, *baqiya wa tatamadad* [lasting and expanding], "go beyond territorial control

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[299] Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, "No Professor Walt, ISIS is not a Revolutionary State," *Muftah,* October 22, 2015, accessed May 28, 2016, http://muftah.org/no-professor-walt-isis-is-not-a-revolutionary-state/#.VoqpiJMrKi6

[300] Ibid.

[301] Hallaq, *The Impossible State* quoted in Mahdavi, "Muslims and Modernities," 66

[302] Mahdavi, "Muslims and Modernities," 66.

[303] Mohammed Ayoob, "The Myth of the Islamic State: The History of a Political Idea," *Foreign Affairs,* April 3, 2016, accessed May 28, 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-04-03/myth-islamic-state

[304] Ibid.

[305] Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a,* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 2008), 4

[306] Mahdavi, "Muslims and Modernities," 66

[307] Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), 222

and political power, and extend to the notion of engineering a new society with distinct social and cultural mores."[308]

Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that the doctrines of Wahhabism and Salafism are not modern concepts; they are historically rooted in the teachings of both Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Contrary to conventional neo-Orientalist arguments, these historical ideas are neither part of the natural composition of Arabic culture, nor are they exclusive to IS. The teachings and practices of Wahhabism and Salafism were revived by IS and affiliate groups due to wars in Iraq and Syria. The idea of an Islamic state proposed by IS is a discourse, and like all other discourses, is a cohesive ensemble "of ideas, concepts, and categorizations about a specific object," which frames that object in a particular way, thereby determining the "possibilities for action in relation to it."[309] Discourses therefore give meaning to social and political realities so that individuals are able to make sense of themselves, each other, and the world in which they live. The relationship between power and knowledge, as articulated by Michel Foucault, illustrates how members of a group frame certain issues and how the populous receives this information or "common knowledge." Foucault argued that:

> In a society there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, nor implemented without the production, accumulation, and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth that operate through, and on the basis of this association. We are [thus] subject to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.[310]

Foucault placed power within discourse, emphasizing not on what power is, but on *what it does.* The production of truth by groups like IS becomes the creation of knowledge through discourse and rhetoric, and is an instrumental exercise of power. Discourses of this sort authorizes and legitimates certain individuals and groups to represent what constitutes of the "truth," making them experts of the dominant narrative and holding power over what can be legitimately asserted. IS' position and power is thus not only structured through discourse, it

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[308] Benedetta Berti and Axel B. Osete, "Generation War': Syria's Children Caught between Internal Conflict and the Rise of the Islamic State," *Strategic Assessment* 18 (2015): 46

[309] Charlotte Epstein, *The Power of Words in International Relations: Birth of An Anti-Whaling Discourse,* (Cambridge, Maas: The MIT Press, 2008), 10

[310] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 93

is also engaged in the reproduction and perpetuation of these discourses. The careful construction of the discourse about "returning" to an "authentic" vision of Islam, and the use of violence, terror and brutality to achieve this goal, makes IS the most recent manifestation of militant Salafism, transforming the lives of several ethno-religious communities in Iraq and Syria.

Equally important, however, is to problematize IS' discourse of "Islamic state" in the postcolonial context of contemporary war and violence in Iraq and Syria. Critical postcolonial and historical approach reminds us how abstract words are empowered and turned into powerful discourses when they are fused with and fueled by favorable material/structural conditions such as the Anglo-American invasion/occupation of Iraq and its aftermath, and the Syrian proxy war.

Conclusion

The Islamic State (IS), a militant Salafi-jihadist organization, is known for its goal of destroying the "artificial" Sykes-Picot border that divides Iraq and Syria, and restoring the Islamic caliphate. After its seizure of Mosul in July 2014, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed,

> O Muslims, indeed engaging oneself in this war [in Iraq and Syria] is obligatory on every Muslim, and no one is excused concerning it. And indeed, we call on you altogether in every place to mobilize, and we specify the sons of the lands of *al-Haramayn* [the two sanctuaries, i.e. Mecca and Media]. So march forth, whether light or heavy, old or young. Rise! O grandsons of the *Muhajirin* and *Ansar* [companions of the Prophet Muhammad]. Rise against *Al Salul* [the House of Saud], the apostate *tawaghit* [tyrannical rulers], and support your people and your brothers in *Sham* [the Levant], Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, the Caucasus, Egypt, Libya, Somalia, the Philippines, Africa, Indonesia, Turkistan, Bangladesh, and in every place.[311]

Between 2013 and 2014, al-Baghdadi's proclamation translated into many violent attempts to gain territorial control in the region, successfully capturing the provinces of al-Raqqa and Deir al-Zour in Syria, and four Iraqi divisions in Mosul and northern Iraq.[312] In December 2016, IS controlled about 60,400 square kilometers in Iraq and Syria.[313] IS has recently lost some territories in Mosul, Iraq and some in Syria. Moreover, its total territorial conquest is about fourteen percent less than what it was in 2015, which was about 78,000 square kilometers. Nonetheless, IS has not stopped spreading fear and terror across the region, including a nightclub shooting in Istanbul on January 1, 2017, and a January 21, 2017 car bomb attack in the Rakhban refugee camp near the Syria-Jordanian border.[314] These terrorist attacks continue to generate perennial debate and discussion about the origins of IS, most of which resemble Orientalist and neo-Orientalist explanations that underscore the "inherent" *cultural* aspects of Muslim-majority communities that created favorable conditions for its emergence in the Middle East.

The ahistorical and essentialist reading of culture, tradition and religion, as shown in this thesis, fails to capture the complex, multidimensional nature of both IS and the Middle East. This thesis therefore proposed an alternative critical historical and postcolonial

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[311] Al-Baghdadi, "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Speech with English subtitles"
[312] Steed, *ISIS*, 119
[313] "Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps," *BBC News,* January 20, 2017, accessed February 20, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034
[314] Ibid.

approach to challenge such cultural essentialist discourses, and answer the following question: *why did the political conditions of Iraq after 2003 foster an environment favorable for the rapid and ambitious rise of the Islamic State?* A critical postcolonial, and political economy theoretical approach was useful to challenge conventional cultural essentialist narratives the rise of IS. I undertook archival methodology and used both secondary and primary sources – including personal collections, official sources, transcripts and videos such as documents, press releases, and videos published by IS, as well as official government and nongovernmental reports– to trace the historical and sociopolitical origins of IS.

In *Chapter One,* I examined the limits of (neo)Orientalism and Orientalism-in-reverse and the merits of critical postcolonialism. I argued that Orientalist and cultural essentialist discourses create a dualism between Islam and the West, positioning Islam as naturally inferior to the West, and legitimizing the implications of hierarchical power structures of the West over Islamic communities. Classical Orientalist texts depict Arabs and Muslims as being "psychologically unprepared" for democracy, making them incapable of representing themselves and requiring representation by "civilized" peoples.[315] In 1993, Samuel Huntington paved the way for contemporary neo-Orientalist explanations of the violence in Iraq and Syria. In his article, Huntington claimed that the post-Cold War environment would be dominated by a "clash of civilizations," of which the conflict between Islam and the West would be the most aggressive. Neo-Orientalists in the present day, like Patricia Crone and Daniel Pipes, reproduce Huntington's thesis, as well as other classical Orientalist discourses, to assert Islam's inherent incompatibility with democracy,[316] and its natural tendency to reject legitimate political authority.[317]

Chapter Two problematized the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and its aftermath in relation to the rise of IS. I argued that the Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq was launched in March 2003, first on the pretext of Saddam Hussein harboring weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and then later as an attempt to transform Iraq into a liberal democracy.[318] The invasion ushered in a policy of De-Ba'athification, or the systematic removal of institutions and practices that belonged to the previous Ba'athist regime, that included, but was not limited to, the disbanding of the Iraqi army and security forces, which left approximately half a million Iraqis unemployed, the eradication of Iraq's cultural and historical heritage, and the prevention of former members of the Ba'ath Party from

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[315] Tuastad, "Neo-Orientalism and the new barbarism thesis," 592
[316] Pipes, "The Muslims are Coming," 29
[317] Crone, *Slaves on Horses,* 62-63
[318] Isakhan, *The Legacy of Iraq*, 1

participating in the newly established Shi'a-majority government of former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki.[319] As demonstrated, the invasion and occupation of Iraq, together with the policies of de-Ba'athification, created a security and political vacuum, which cultivated a favorable environment for the proliferation of militant jihadist groups within the Iraqi territory, such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and, later, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). In addition, the post-invasion political framework of Iraq comprised of the exclusionary policies of Nouri al-Maliki's premiership, and the corrupt and inefficient nature of his government.[320] The IS leadership, feeding off Sunni grievances, positioned itself as the sole champion and defender of the marginalized Sunni Arab population, thereby cultivating an important social base in Iraq. It is therefore important to understand the rise of IS in Iraq in the context of the Anglo-American occupation that contributed to the state's political, territorial, and socio-economic fragmentation. The chapter argued that to claim that violence in Iraq is merely a clash of sectarian identities, as cultural essentialist explanations often do, is to disregard the undeniable role the 2003 US-led invasion, the post-invasion policy of de-Ba'athification, and Nouri al-Maliki's exclusionary and corrupt government played in cultivating the conflict and institutionalizing sectarianism. As this chapter illustrated, the violence in Iraq "must not be ascribed to fanatics or political extremists; rather the occupation has created a situation that provides a breeding-ground for all kinds of atrocities."[321] The chapter concluded by maintaining that it is impractical to understand the rise of IS without first examining the political history of the invasion and its aftermath.

Chapter Three examined the impact of the Syrian Proxy War on the rise and expansion of IS. As discussed, the Syrian conflict started in April 2011 after President Bashar al-Assad ordered for the brutal suppression of non-violent protestors. The 2011 Syrian uprising, like other uprisings across the MENA, protested *al-istibdad* [repression] and *al-tahmeesh* [exclusion], and demanded freedom, bread, social justice, and human dignity. These uprisings, as argued, had no ethno-religious basis or demands; they were merely social and political movements that stemmed out years of brutal repression by the Assad regime and the lack of state-funded welfare programs. The Syrian uprising, in particular, derived from decades of Assadism, a type of autocracy that centered on the leadership cult of Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad. Assadism exempted the head of state from accountability to the Syrian people, and institutionalized ethno-religious favoring by appointing members of the

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[319] Alnasseri, "Understanding Iraq," 96
[320] Gerges, *ISIS*, 12
[321] Ibid.

Assad family's own Alawite community to important political, military, and intelligence institutions. Like in Iraq, the political and social environment in Syria provide IS with an acute opportunity to exploit valid Sunni grievances, and position itself as the defender of an oppressed Sunni community in Syria. I argued that the Syrian uprising's opportune timing therefore gave the AQI leadership the drive to send some of their fighters, including Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, to Syria to establish a jihadist cell and fight against the Assad regime. In addition, the chapter showed that the militarization of the Syrian uprising also pulled in regional and global powers with competing interests into the geopolitical struggle for power, economic resources, and influence. The actions and interests of nine key players in the Syrian conflict are summarized as follows: The United States, Britain, and France training, arming, and financing about fifty separate FSA groups in an attempt to overthrow the Assad regime;[322] Saudi Arabia and Qatar's support for both the National Coalition and the FSA, as well as their rival Salafi militia groups to weaken Iranian influence in the region;[323] Turkey's early financial assistance to some militant jihadist groups to defeat the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and to disparage the Syrian Kurdish population;[324] Iran's support for the Assad regime to preserve its strategic depth in the Mediterranean coast, and keep Syria as an open channel for the transportation of weapons and agents to Hezbollah in Lebanon;[325] and Russia and China's interest in the survival of Bashar al-Assad regime for geostrategic reasons by blocking UNSC resolutions on Syria that call for the imposition of economic sanctions and humanitarian intervention.[326] The chapter argued that the ongoing Syrian conflict is therefore an amalgamation of human rights abuses by the Assad regime, al-Nusra and IS, *and* mass civilian casualties committed by regional and global powers that are driven primarily by geopolitical interests. The rise of IS in Syria should be analyzed within the context of the brutal repression of Assadism, the 2011 uprising and its suppression by Bashar al-Assad, and the presence of conflicting foreign interests that continue to have detrimental implications for the Syrian civil society. I argued that a critical historical and postcolonial approach is useful to contextualize decades of asymmetrical political and economic power structures during the years of Assadism, the unequal allocation of economic and political power among the Syrian civil society that led to the 2011 uprising, and the ongoing war of all against all, which fosters an environment favorable for the rise of al-Nusra and the spread of IS' agenda in Syria.

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[322] Lister, "Al-Qaeda Is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria"
[323] Wehrey, "The Saudi Thermidor," 345
[324] Carpenter, "Tangled Web," 13
[325] Terrill, "Iran's Strategy for Saving Assad," 224
[326] Bagdonas, "Russia's Interests in the Syrian Conflict," 56

Chapter Four historicized and assessed the discourse of Militant Wahhabism and Salafism. I argued that it is equally important to consider the development and spread of militant Wahhabism and Salafism in the study of IS to gain a deeper understanding of where its root ideas and doctrine emanate from. The chapter demonstrated how IS has borrowed its ideological foundation from the teachings of Wahhabism, a puritanical, ultraconservative, and fundamentalist interpretation of the Hanbali school of Islamic thought founded by Ibn Abd al Wahhab. The chapter argued that this desire to "purify" the Islamic faith and to return to the "ideal" model of Islamic society, specifically Prophet Muhammad's time in Medina, forms the core of Salafism, which both Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab advocated for in the past, and which IS currently exhorts. I argued that IS actively implements the concepts of *takfir* [excommunication] and *wala wal baraa* [loyalty to Islam and rejection of un-Islamic practices] to violently mobilize against those they consider to be apostates or unbelievers, particularly the Shi'a populations of Iraq and Syria. After their seizure of Mosul in July 2014, IS used bulldozers to reduced four Sunni Arab and Sufi shrines, and six Shi'a mosques to rubble.[327] In addition, IS' targeted bombings on predominantly Shi'a neighborhoods in Baghdad in July 2016 left about three hundred people dead.[328] As such, just as Ibn Abd al-Wahhab presented his teachings as a correction to widespread ignorance, IS has also been able to narrowly construct a thin line between whom those they consider to be "true" believers and those who are to be labeled apostates.[329]

I also argued that there exists a relationship between Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings and the ideology IS adheres to; however, the relationship between the House of Saud and the doctrine of Wahhabism should not be overlooked. Since its inception in 1932, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been actively exporting an "official" brand of state-sponsored Wahhabism in the form of *madrassas* [Islamic schools], mosques, colleges, and Islamic centers to countries like Nigeria, Chechnya, Bosnia, and Tanzania. Furthermore, While the ideological connection between Wahhabism and IS is unquestionable, particularly because both have used violence and compulsion to achieve desired political goals and a return to the origins of Islam, the two are far from synonymous. On the one hand, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab remained largely silent on restoring the Islamic caliphate or establishing an Islamic state. In

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[327] "ISIS destroys shrines, Shiite mosques in Iraq," *Al Arabiya,* July 5, 2014, accessed February 22, 2017, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/05/ISIS-destroys-Shiite-mosques-shrines-in-Iraq.html
[328] Ranj Alaaldin, "The ISIS campaign against Iraq's Shi'a Muslims is not politics. It's genocide," *The Guardian,* January 5, 2017, accessed February 22, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/05/isis-iraq-shia-muslims-jihadis-atrocities
[329] Al-Ibrahim, "ISIS, Wahhabism and Takfir," 413

contrast, the establishment of an Islamic state remains the principle objective for the IS leadership.

The Limitations and Accomplishments of this Study

The study of IS is a complex and multidimensional project that requires the careful examination and analysis of a multitude of different narratives both within the Middle East and beyond its borders. My thesis delved into the contemporary political history of Iraq, Syria, and the doctrine of Wahhabism, highlighting important events to understand the rise of IS in the present day. My thesis also challenged and problematized Orientalism and cultural essentialism as ways of analyzing the IS phenomenon, and instead advocated for a critical historical and postcolonial approach that would allow for the contextualization of IS within the interplay of political, economic, social, and ideological factors that enabled its rise in Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that my thesis does not represent a comprehensive and exhaustive analysis of IS. The inability to travel to Iraq and Syria to interview different political and social factions deprives my thesis of personally collected primary sources, and limits the variety of indigenous voices present in my findings. In addition, the narrow focus of my research question, to only consider major political events after the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, left out important aspects that could be incorporated into future studies of IS. These include: the use of both social media and mass media by IS to disseminate information and garner support from around the world; the coordination of IS-related terrorist attacks within and beyond the Middle East, such as the Paris attacks of 2015 and the 2016 Istanbul bombing in Sultanahmet Square, and what this means for those states currently involved in the coalition against IS; and IS recruitment programs both in Muslim-majority states and in the West to examine how the institutionalization of inclusive domestic policies towards minority groups could mitigate the situation.

These shortcomings aside, this thesis was able to demonstrate that a critical historical and postcolonial approach would defy ahistorical and apolitical explanations of past and present political, economic, social, and ideological power structures in the Middle East, and could fully explain the important socio-political conditions that led to the rise of IS. This alternative approach acknowledges the perpetual implications of colonialism and imperialism, postcolonial conditions, and power politics in the region, thereby providing a compelling contribution to the critical study of IS. As such, my thesis identified three significant pillars that contributed to the rise of IS first in Iraq and then in Syria, namely the

2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and its post-invasion policies, the ongoing Syrian civil/proxy war, and the development and spread of militant Wahhabism and Salafism.

Furthermore, this study proposed that the fragmentation of the socio-political fabric in Iraq after the 2003 invasion and occupation, and in Syria after the brutal suppression of peaceful protestors in 2011 created ideological and political vacuums that enabled IS and their ideas of militant Wahhabism and Salafism to cultivate and grow. IS "uses identity as the driving force for the movement and its expansion, expressed through a narrow-minded and intolerant Salafi-jihadist (Islamist) ideology."[330] The group's revival in Iraq and its establishment in Syria greatly benefitted from Sunnis who felt marginalized, excluded, and persecuted by Nouri al-Maliki's government and Bashar al-Assad's regime. IS is therefore a byproduct of "decades of dictatorship, failed governance and [economic] development, and abject poverty, made worse by ongoing foreign intervention."[331] IS also feeds off the false dichotomy between the West and Islam, which remains prevalent within Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses about the Middle East and its people. It is thus imperative to rethink and reconsider how exclusionary policies towards minorities, including President Trump's recent "Muslim ban" that banned entry into the United States from seven Muslim-majority countries, might contribute to Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, and play directly into the hands of IS recruitment programs. Rather than focusing on culture and tradition to understand terror and violence, as perpetrated by groups like IS, it lends greater validity to understand the political, economic, and historical conditions within a particular geographical context that led to the rise and growth of jihadist groups and their activities. Such a narrative is based on critical historical postcolonialism, which allows for the voices of imperial repression and political violence to be heard and acknowledged. My thesis is therefore a courageous attempt to break through traditional accounts of the Middle East that focus entirely on culture and religion to understand and explain the dynamics of the region and its people. For someone who continues to face obstacles within the parameters of cultural essentialism that often focus on abstract concepts like the "Arab/Muslim mind" or the "Arab/Muslim behavior" as a natural, innate part of my being, my thesis seeks to embody a collection of narratives that will not only guide analyses of the Middle East away from an overemphasis on religion and tradition, but will also empower the diverse peoples of the region to continue to tell stories of their economic, political, and social struggles as progressive strides towards political reconciliation, social healing, and state reconstruction.

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[330] Gerges, *ISIS*, 262
[331] Ibid., 289

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