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THE RISE OF THE IS (ISLAMIC STATE) IN SYRIA AND IRAQ AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

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ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring is a social movement triggered by a complex set of social, political and economic factors. Despite the initial success of the Arab Spring in ousting some of the bureaucratic-authoritarian status-quo oriented regimes, mass mobilization of people could not oust all dictatorships and introduce meaningful reforms toward more democratization in the region. Worse, the mass protests that started as part of the Arab Spring later deteriorated into utter chaos and even civil war in some parts of the region. With the disappearance of state authority in those places, sub-state actors gained ground, challenging the stability and order that were once provided by authoritarian regimes through coercion. The IS's sudden expansion has mainly resulted from large scale instability in Iraq and Syria and the disappearance of nation-state borders between the two states. The IS, which emerged as a sub-state actor, is currently in the process of becoming a proto state. Thus, this paper has two simultaneous research goals. The *first* is to establish the link between lack of institutionalization of the Arab Spring and its failure to bring about positive and meaningful political change in the region with the power vacuum created in the region and subsequent emergence of sub-state actors and groups like the Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the IS (Islamic State) in Iraq and Syria. The *second* is to study and evaluate the emergence and growth of the IS in conjunction with the deteriorating security situation in Iraq and Syria, and how the international involvement with the IS might have shaped the tactics and the course of action that the IS has taken since the IS captured the city of Mosul in June 2014, shocking the whole world. Assessment of the IS's

military, economic and political prospects will also be provided in the concluding section.

Keywords: The Arab Spring, the IS (Islamic State), Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, Turkish Foreign Policy on the Middle East, American Foreign Policy on the Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

The Arab Spring is a social movement triggered by a complex set of social, political and economic factors. The social movements literature suggests that social movements do not take place in a vacuum; there must be some underlying structural factors just like the ones that existed for the Arab countries experiencing the Arab Spring. These structural factors, such as authoritarianism, inefficient and stagnant bureaucracy, weak economic performance, problems with distribution of wealth, arbitrary rule and leadership cult, prompt the masses to mobilize. However, trying to explain the Arab Spring only with the structural factors would not be very explanatory. Two additional crucial factors must be taken into consideration to fully understand why masses were mobilized against the authoritarian regimes of the Arab world: i) the changes in the social psychological factors, and ii) availability of mobilizing factors for the masses and movement activists on the streets. For instance, the Arab demographics is quite different than that of the European countries, i.e., most Arab countries have a larger section of young people in their population than the European countries do. When the expectations of the large young masses on the streets are not met, it creates a widespread frustration among the youth which would manifest itself when available channels are presented. The availability of mass media tools further deepens the youth's frustration as they find a chance to compare their situation with that of other people in different countries. Here, the social media needs special attention as it created a venue for the protestors on the streets to mobilize and streamline their protests on the streets.

Despite the impact that the Arab Spring left across the region, mass mobilization of people could not oust all dictatorships and introduce reforms demanded by the masses on the streets. In the Middle East, probably with the exception of Tunisia, no country experiencing the Arab Spring was able to write a liberal constitution, provide more peace, stability, and economic growth for their citizens, and get rid of the authoritarian-bureaucratic regimes which had become one of the defining characteristics of the region throughout the years. Worse, sub-state groups like Al-Qaeda, the IS (Islamic State, also known as the ISI-*The Islamic State of Iraq*, ISIS- *The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* and the ISIL-*The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*), Al-Nusra and other smaller radical groups

further expanded their activities and contributed to the instability across the region. It is evident that there is a serious power vacuum in the region and a big security problem for Iraq and Syria, and for the countries neighboring them in addition to the humanitarian crisis prompted by instability, civil war, lack of state authority and terrorist attacks which all sprung due to the power vacuum created by the Arab Spring. The main question here that one needs to ask is why the Arab Spring had been unable to positively transform the region for more meaningful political change?

1. WHAT WAS THE ARAB SPRING? AND WHY WAS IT UNSUCCESSFUL?

The answer to the question above lies in the processes that follow and/or accompany social movements. In other words, certain social processes are meaningful when they accompany other social processes. The same rule goes for the Arab Spring. With a widespread popular support, the Arab Spring was an outburst of anger, resentment and frustration of the Arab masses against the authoritarian-bureaucratic regimes of the region. As a social movement, the Arab Spring has a definite meaning. However, because the Arab Spring was unable to institutionalize properly, the countries experiencing the Arab Spring were unable to make necessary changes to ensure the smooth transition from the authoritarian-bureaucratic regimes to more democratic ones. Even in the Tunisian case, which is considered a success scenario after the Arab Spring, the Islamists lost the elections against the secularists. This electoral loss is significant, since right after the Arab Spring, Islamists across the region had huge amount of legitimacy; however, the electoral success of the secularists in Tunisia showed that despite the legitimacy of the Islamists, people's immediate concerns were rather mundane and secular, not ideological. In other words, people demanded solutions for their day-to-day problems and trusted those who could deliver the solution for those problems (secularists), not those who brought about change (Islamists). Thus, in the initial stages of the Arab Spring, people assigned too much value to the process that had been taking place on the streets and believed that once the authoritarian regimes were gone, everything would be perfect. In other words, the Arab Spring was successful in ousting the authoritarian-bureaucratic regimes and people expected the same level of success in democratization. However, in the later stages of the Arab Spring, that expected success in democratic transitions was not realized.

Social movements like the Arab Spring might result in some accomplishments ranging from a policy change in a specific policy area to the ousting of authoritarian regimes. However, it would be a grave mistake to expect social movements to ensure a smooth transition from authoritarianism to democracy unless the social movement is institutionalized. Here,

institutionalization refers to a group of democratizers, who emerge from within the social movement, establishing formal political institutions (usually in the form of a political party) and overseeing the transition from the authoritarian system to the democratic one. Because social movements are not part of formal politics (social movements are indeed informal, thus they are formed and disbanded pretty quickly), they do not have the ability to oversee the transition process. Thus, a formal institution, usually a political party, is required to oversee the process. A perfect example here would be the Polish Solidarity Movement. The Solidarity Movement (*Solidarność*) originated as a non-Communist labor movement in the shipyards of Gdansk challenging the authority of the Polish Communist Party in Poland in 1980 under Lech Walesa's leadership. A year after its establishment, the number of the Solidarity Movement's membership had reached ten million which was roughly about one third of all working-age population in Poland at the time. The Movement played a significant role in the ousting of the Communist Party in Poland and in the democratic transition process. Although, other factors could also be counted as determining factors for the Solidarity's success, such as American and the Roman Catholic Church's support, the main reason for the Solidarity's success lies in its organizational capabilities and its ability to turn into a formal political institution after the fall of the Polish Communist Party, as it originates from within the hierarchies of a traditional labor union. The leadership structure of the union served as an organizational channel for the Solidarity leaders to streamline their political struggle against the Polish Communist Party over the networks and opportunities provided by the union's hierarchical structure.

During the Arab Spring, more traditional Gulf Arab states dodged the threat posed by the Arab Spring for their regimes by bribing their citizens with hefty welfare packages. In Libya and Syria instability still continues. In Egypt, the short tenure of Islamists under Muhammad Moursi was a complete failure, and the Egyptian military took over just one year after President Moursi's tenure. In short, it would not be wrong to assume that the Arab Spring was unable to institutionalize; in other words, meaningful political change did not take place due to lack of emergence of a formal institution overseeing the transition process from authoritarianism to democracy. Accordingly, older elements from the old political establishment resurfaced (like the Egyptian army taking control of the country after Moursi's one year tenure) and sub-state groups (like the Al-Qaeda and the IS) have gained ground in places where state authority is absent or very weak. These sub-state groups exploited existing sectarian divides, and by using scare tactics and excessive violence, they have been trying to further destabilize the territories where they operate. Worse, the IS is in the process of becoming a proto-state as it expands its sphere of operations,

recruit more members both from within and outside of the region, generate revenues, and capture more territory.

2. THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER THE ARAB SPRING: THE POWER VACUUM AND GROWTH OF SUB-STATE ACTORS

Given the limits of the transformative effect of the Arab Spring, the main question that needs to be asked here is what kind of Middle East we would expect to see in the foreseeable future. There are several possibilities. One possibility is the increase of instability in the region due to ethnic and/or sectarian violence threatening the already fragile stability in the region. Another possibility is the change of borders and/or capitals in the region. A third possibility is the emergence of a larger conflict and/or chaos in the region with the involvement of bigger states that have interests in the region. Regardless of which possibility happens, it is evident that sub-state actors like the IS, Al-Qaeda, and/or PKK/PYD/the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) are going to play a far greater role in the politics of the region in the near future than they have so far.

Until the Arab Spring, the political order which had been established by the Great Powers of the West after the First World War in the region did not change much until the end of the cold war with two big exceptions: Arab-Israeli Wars and the Islamic revolution in Iran. It was right after Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait when the U.S. forced the Iraqi troops out of Kuwait and U.S. military bases were established in the Arab world. The new period, triggered by the mass movements on the Arab streets, had some consequences leading to the weakening of some of the regimes, thus leading to the emergence of sub-state actors further destabilizing parts of the region. Therefore, it would not be a surprise for us to see more involvement of the Western powers, especially of the U.S. in the region. However, this time the American involvement in the region will not be in the shape of an extensive military engagement as it happened in 1991 or 2003. This time, just like it happened in Kobani for instance, the American involvement will be limited and functional. As of January of 2015, the IS forces had been pushed out of Kobani after fierce fighting on the streets when the Kurdish powers were finally able to push the IS forces out of the city with substantial support from the U.S. in the form of airstrikes on strategic IS targets. Further, the U.S. also provided valuable intelligence and supplies for the Kurdish fighters in Kobani. To fully understand the current situation in the region, we need to look at how the IS has emerged and later expanded in the region when the Arab Spring shook the region.

3. THE EMERGENCE AND RISE OF THE IS

The IS was founded as *Jama'at Al-Tawhid wa Al-Jihad* in 1999, the predecessor of Iraqi *Al-Qaeda*, by Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi (Ahmed Fadeel Al-Nazal Al-Khalayleh). Before taking part in the Iraqi insurgency against the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and establishing *Al-Tawhid*, Zarqawi was fighting in Western Afghanistan where he started his own terrorist group named *Jund Al-Sham*. Several years after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was over, Zarqawi returned to the Middle East. He was arrested in Jordan in 1994 for charges of weapons and explosives possession and was sentenced to 15 years in prison. After serving 5 years, he was released in 1999. Zarqawi joined the Iraqi insurgency in 2003 upon the American invasion of the country, and renamed his *Jund Al-Sham*, *Jama'at Al-Tawhid wa Al-Jihad*. In 2004, Zarqawi joined *Al-Qaeda* and renamed his group Al-Qaeda in Iraq (Saltman and Winter, 2014: 29). This was actually a marriage of convenience because Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden had a deep difference of opinion on the use of excessive violence in Iraq. Zarqawi was very keen on using excessive violence, whereas the *Al-Qaeda* leadership often insisted on avoiding excessive violence, advocated focusing their terrorist activities on the American troops and avoiding harming local Iraqis where possible (Lister, 2014:6-8). With the merger, Zarqawi hoped to attract more funds and fighters, whereas Osama bin Laden desperately needed a presence in Iraq. Several other small groups joined Al-Qaeda in Iraq forming the *Mujahedeen Shura Council* in 2005 (Barrett, 2014: 11).

The Council was actually an umbrella organization including some major Sunni Islamist groups taking part in the Iraqi insurgency including the Iraqi Al-Qaeda and several other smaller groups such as *Jeish Al-Taiifa Al-Mansoura, Katbiyan Ansar Al-Tawhid wa Al-Sunnah, Saray Al-Jihad Group, Al-Ghuraba Brigades,* and *Al-Ahwal Brigades* (TRAC, http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/mujahideen-shura-council-islamic-state-iraq 21/01/2015). In 2006, Zarqawi died in an American airstrike in Iraq, and Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir, an Egyptian jihadist close to Ayman Al-Zawahiri, became its leader. Under Al-Muhajir's leadership the group decided to form the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) headed by Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi (not to be confused with Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi) in collaboration with other Sunni jihadist groups. When Al-Muhajir and Al-Baghdadi were both killed in an attack in Iraq, the group's activities dropped significantly. It was at this point when Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi (Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali Al-Badri Al-Samarrai) headed the organization with an agenda of reviving the group's activities through an endless campaign of car bombs and suicide bombing attacks. The group's substantial expansion took place when the Syrian civil war started in May 2011 (Barret, 2014: 12).

The ISI concentrated its activities around the cities of Al-Anbar, Nineveh and Kirkuk at the time. Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was the head of the group whose activities exponentially grew under Al-Baghdadi's leadership. When the group expanded its activities further into Syria after 2011, it renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in April 2013 (BBC News, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144 14/01/2015). When the Syrian war started, Al-Baghdadi and his lieutenants did not want to be part of the conflicts in Syria as they perceived it as a distraction of their Iraq-centered terrorist activities. However, as the Syrian war became more violent and a long lasting crisis, in August 2011 Al-Baghdadi sent nine Syrian members of the group to Syria under Abu Muhammed Al-Jowlani's leadership to start their activities in Northern Syria. There, Al-Jowlani established *Jabhat Al-Nusra.* After the fast expansion of the group's activities in Syria Al-Jowlani refused that *Al-Nusra* was part of the ISI. Thus, Al-Jowlani pledged allegiance to *Al-Qaeda* as he wanted to act independently of the ISI (Saltman and Winter, 2014:30). Zawahiri wanted to reconcile *Al-Nusra* and the ISI, however he was unsuccessful. In return, Al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) trying to give the impression that he had control on the Islamic State both in Iraq and Syria. Moreover, Al-Baghdadi sent Amr Al-Absi (Abu Al-Athir Al-Shami) to set up a camp in Northern Syria and recruit *Al-Nusra* members to the ISIS, an effort which mostly became successful (Barrett, 2014: 12-13).

After the capture of Mosul on June 10, the ISIS declared Al-Baghdadi as the caliph of the Islamic State (after the declaration of Al-Baghdadi's caliphate, the ISIS renamed itself the Islamic State). It has been estimated that currently the IS has control over about 40,000 sq. km of land in Iraq and Syria. This corresponds to roughly the size of Belgium. The IS-controlled territory includes the cities of Mosul, Tikrit, Fallujah and Tal Afar in Iraq and the city of Raqqah in Syria (BBC News, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144 14/01/2015). This is roughly about 40 percent of Iraq's land. Indeed, estimating the population of this IS-controlled area is challenging due to two reasons as Gunter (2014: 2) puts it: *First*, Iraq hasn't had a national census since 1987. *Second*, the conflict has triggered a massive refugee movement in Iraq and Syria, thus it is very difficult to predict how much population is left within the IS-controlled territory. However, based on rough predictions from pre-conflict surveys, it can be said that currently about 25 to 35 percent of Iraq's population (9 to 13 million people) live within the IS-controlled territory.

4. THE POLITICO-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND STRUCTURE OF THE IS

The roots of the IS's ideology go way back to the 14th century Muslim scholar Ibn-Taymiyyah (1263-1328) through Muhammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703-1792), who is the founder of Wahhabism, a *salafi* belief in Islam. Both scholars' interpretation of Islam is highly puritanical and it is based on a literal understanding of the holy Qur'an and the *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet). They both labeled every innovation in religion since Prophet Muhammed's time *bid'ah* (a heretical innovation in religion). Thus, it is essentially a puritanical belief at its core and any other interpretation of Islam in this regard is not valid. Invalid interpretations and practices of Islam, therefore, must be destroyed. This is indeed the essence of *takfirism* (excommunication, declaring one Muslim an apostate, i.e, to announce someone *kafir*-a disbeliever). It is not just permissible, but it is a religious obligation to destroy the *kafir*(s) and the *kufr*, the *kafir*'s belief. Additionally, with the Shi'a dominated government in Iraq and Alawi dominated government in Syria, the IS continues to present itself as the true protector of Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria and continues to exploit the sectarian divide in both countries (Lister 2014: 18).

Another pillar of the IS is Ba'athism, which is a combination of Arab nationalism and Pan-Arabism. The Ba'athist aspect of the IS is actually overshadowed by its *takfirism*. Indeed, between 2008 and 2010, many ex-Ba'athist former officers of the Iraqi military joined the IS. The Ba'athists provided valuable military and organizational skills for the IS. For instance, Hajji Bakr, a high rank Ba'athist ex-army officer is one of them. Abu Muslim Al-Turkmani and Abu Ali Al-Anbari, who oversee the IS's military operations in Iraq and Syria respectively, are also former members of the Iraqi Ba'ath party and Iraqi military (Barrett 2014: 18-19). Additionally, Azhar Al-Obeidi, the IS's Mosul governor and Almed Abd Al-Rashid, the IS's Tikrit governor are both Ba'athist former Iraqi army generals (Lister 2014: 20).

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the head of the IS, was born in Samarra in 1971. Before moving to Fallujah, he studied at the Islamic University in Baghdad. His neighborhood was a poor one and Al-Baghdadi served as an assistant imam at a local mosque. Al-Baghdadi's young adulthood friends did not regard him as having charisma or leadership qualities. Barrett argues that a decorative account of his biography appeared in the online propaganda machinery of the IS in July 2013 claiming that Al-Baghdadi received a doctorate degree in Islamic Studies from the Islamic University of Baghdad and briefly served in Tikrit University. According to the claims, he served in several mosques in small towns around Baghdad, and finally became a member of the ISI Shura Council (Barret 2014: 26-27). Indeed, coming from the Badri clan, a sub-clan of the Quraish, the tribe

of Prophet Muhammed, made it easier for Al-Baghdadi to proclaim himself as the caliph of the IS. Al-Baghdadi possibly thought being a descendant of the Prophet would have made it easier for the Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis to accept his position as the caliph. Although historically, being a descendant of the Prophet is not a requirement to become a caliph, it provides additional status and legitimacy for those who is to hold the position of the caliph.

The IS has a very hierarchical structure and Al-Baghdadi and his two senior advisors, Al-Turkmani and Al-Anbari, set the general strategies of the organization. Then, the orders are passed down through the hierarchy of the organization. The lower ranks of the organization have a considerable amount of autonomy in their operations, which enables the organization to operate at different fronts simultaneously. The highest decision-making body is the *Shura* Council and several other lower councils work under the *Shura* Council. The *Shari'a*, the Military, Security and Intelligence, Provincial, Finance and Media Councils complement the *Shura* Council. What these councils do is evident in their names. The *Shari'a* Council, which is staffed by locally reputable religious scholars, assures that the *Shari'a* is implemented under the IS-controlled territory, and the Provincial Council appoints governors to the 18 cities that are currently under the control of the IS (Barrett: 28-34) In the territories under their control, the IS is known to subsidize food prices and cap rent prices. Civilian bus services are usually free, the basic infrastructure is often repaired, postal services are maintained and free healthcare and vaccinations are provided for the public (Lister 2014: 28). These services definitely increase the level of the IS's legitimacy among the masses.

5. THE MILITARY AND FINANCIAL PROSPECTS OF THE IS

The growth of the IS has taken place through a combination of various activities in different fronts in the form of very violent terrorist activities, effective recruitment, relentless propaganda and a strong network engaged in revenue generating activities such as smuggling, illegal oil sales, kidnapping, extortion, theft and sale of archeological artifacts (Saltman and Winter, 2014: 48-51).

It has been estimated by the CIA that the IS has approximately 31.000 fighters in Iraq and Syria at its disposal (BBC News, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29169914 09/02/2015). Considering the weakness of both the Iraqi and Syrian central governments, it took roughly about 1.000 fighters for the IS to capture Mosul in June 2014. The IS tactics could be summarized as a combination of acts of terrorism, insurgency operations, and conventional military tactics. Usually, the IS forces hit its targets first with a series of car bombs and suicide bombers, then they usually gain control of some strategic targets that belong to the enemy, and finally launch a final attack on the rest. After capturing a target, securing the area and

maintaining control of the target are essential (Barret 2014: 36). The IS specifically tries to solidify its presence in the Sunni dominated cities and towns of Iraq and Syria. In this regard, the only exception would be the city of Kobani which is in the Kurdish controlled region in the north. Barrett (2014: 35) argues that other than intimidating the Kurds, two practical reasons might have prompted the IS to attack and attempt to capture Kobani in September and October of 2014: gaining control of the water resources and grain silos in Kobani.

The financial operations of the IS complement its military operations. In mid-2014, the estimates of the IS's income were in the range of approximately $3 million per day and its assets were between $1.3 and $2 billion. The IS fighters receive between $200 and $600 per month based on seniority and experience. Those who are in senior administrative and military positions could get up to $2000 per month. The fighters also receive free housing and furniture confiscated from those who fled the IS-controlled territory. The IS's revenue generating activities include illegal oil sales, smuggling, kidnapping, extortion/taxation, theft/confiscation and sale of archeological artifacts. The tax revenues also include revenues of a monthly head tax of $720 per a non-Muslim adult and extortion of truck drivers in the IS-controlled territory. It has been reported that each truck entering Mosul must pay a $400 toll while smaller commercial vehicles pay between $100 and $50 (Barrett 2014: 45-48).

6. SHIFTING BALANCE OF POWER

The IS appears to be closer to achieve its ultimate objective of establishing and maintaining a state of its own in Iraq and Syria despite all the difficulties, especially international airstrikes on their forces. The IS poses a serious threat to the regional and international security mainly due to the scale and spread of its military operations, and the extent of its control over the territory, its ability to generate revenues, success in global recruitment and in media operations (Lister 2014: 16).

With this support, the U.S. in a way wanted to contain the IS expansion in the region after the IS forces captured Mosul and later attacked Kobani, because further IS expansion would upset the balance in the region in the IS's favor. Thus, the American airstrikes must be perceived as a containment strategy rather than an offensive against the IS for the purpose of totally eliminating it. The American airstrikes also helped the Kurds to solidify their control further in their territories. This definitely has consequences for the future of Kurds. *First*, the Kurds of the region further increased solidary among themselves by uniting against the IS attacks. *Second*, the increasing solidarity of the Kurds will inevitably further break the ties between the KRG and the Iraqi central government. It is important to note that the relations between the Iraqi central

government and the KRG had already been tenuous before the IS attack on Kobani (Phillips, 2014).

Syria is currently in a state what is known as a failed state in the political science and international relations literature. Assad is able to survive due to the support of his Alawi sect that controls the Syrian state and co-opted Sunnis, who are able to survive due to their loyalty to the Assad regime. The rest of the country is almost exhausted (Weinberg 2014: 340). In Iraq, the KRG has very strong aspirations to gain independence from the central Iraqi government. Current developments increase the Kurdish hopes for independence. Moreover, the Shi'a influence in Southern Iraq is still strong which, in the long run, can lead to further disintegration of Iraq. The central question here is what the Sunni Iraq is going to do. There is currently a lot of room for speculation regarding what is going to happen in Iraq and Syria. One possible scenario is balkanization of them with fragmented entities divided along sectarian and/or religious lines fighting with one another. Another scenario is unification of certain sectarian and/or religious groups like Sunni Arabs of Iraq and Sunni Arabs of Syria because both in Iraq and Syria, Sunni Arabs are left out of the system (It is indeed this frustration of the Sunni Arabs in both countries that the IS has been exploiting for years).

In Syria, the Sunnis have been historically left out of the system since the establishment of the Syrian state. Exceptions included little number of co-opted Sunni bureaucrats and merchants in Damascus and Aleppo. In Iraq, Sunni Arabs had been dominant since the Ottoman times until the end of Saddam Hussain's tenure in power; because of being Sunnis, Ottomans always promoted Sunni Arabs in Iraq. This had not changed during the British rule and the independence period as most educated Iraqis were among the Sunnis. Saddam took it a step further when he co-opted his Sunni tribesmen for high-rank bureaucratic positions in the governmental and the military apparatus of the Iraqi state. However, after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Shi'a Arabs took control of the government, the bureaucracy and the military which is the underlying cause of the Sunni frustration in the country. Thus, being in a disadvantageous position, there is a chance (although slight) that the Sunni Arabs might seek unification if conditions in the region deteriorate further, if stability could not be maintained and if they had the choice. However, the IS has been doing this with widespread violence and horror. In this complicated picture, Iran might try to increase its influence over the Shi'a Arabs through religious leaders that Iran had been exporting to the Shi'a Arab world since the early days of the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Another aspect that is highly likely to change the course of events in the region is the answer to the question of who is going to become the next president

of the U.S. Indeed, depending upon whether Republicans or Democrats will win the upcoming presidential elections in the U.S., we can produce two different scenarios regarding the American involvement in the region. If Democrats win the presidential elections, the existing limited and functional American involvement in the region will be simply maintained as Democrats do not usually tend to get the U.S. involved in large scale military adventures abroad. However, if a Republican candidate becomes the president, we might expect more intense and higher levels of American military involvement in the region in the upcoming years. Furthermore, it would not be a surprise to see the deterioration of relations between the KRG and the Iraqi central government which has been happening gradually since the establishment of the KRG (Phillips, 2014). In Syria, it appears that the stalemate between the Assad forces and the insurgency and/or the IS will continue in a prolonged state in the foreseeable future. The IS is still powerful in northern Syria and northwestern Iraq, and the name change of the organization from Al-Qaeda in Iraq, to Islamic State of Iraq, then to Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, then to the Islamic State reflects the geographical ambition of the organization. It is also a rejection of the colonial borders established with the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 (Barrett, 2014: 21-23). In the meantime, similar small sub-state actors might have aspirations to join the IS in the region. However, with the Kobani defeat, the IS appears to have reached its natural borders and for the time being the U.S. airstrikes have proven to be effective. Another factor that complicates the politics of the region is the security of energy lines. Since a possible IS attack on the energy lines is going to upset the world economy, a prompt military reaction should be strongly expected to prevent the oil prices to skyrocket, ensuring the steady flow of Middle Eastern oil to the Western countries.

The finances for the IS mainly come from theft, extortion, oil sales and additional illegal activities. For instance, when the IS captured Mosul, the IS militia ransacked the Iraqi state bank's branch in the city, getting millions of dollars in cash and in gold. However, the biggest share in the organization's revenues is its illegal sale of oil. If the oil wells under the IS's control are destroyed, the organization will inevitably fall into a financial crisis.

The IS's ability to sustain its military operations, the flow of recruits from within and outside of the region, and to secure the generation of funds will prove key to its future success. However, one must not exaggerate the prospects of the IS's success. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that the IS has reached its natural borders. *First*, the American airstrikes have been successful in containing the IS. *Second*, it would be a strategic disaster for the IS to further increase the number of fronts that it needs to fight by attacking more targets such as the KRG or possibly Turkey. *Third*, the IS currently controls the vast majority of the territory including the Arab Sunni population in Iraq and Syria. However,

beyond the limits of the IS's "Sunni Zone" things will be definitely difficult to deal with for the IS both militarily and ideologically as the Shi'a population outside of the IS's Sunni zone is not going to welcome the IS's Sunni-Wahhabi/Salafist ideology. *Fourth*, the possible emergence of an international coalition to disrupt the incoming of recruits and funds will possibly choke the financial resources and manpower of the organization.

As it appears, currently the U.S. is highly unwilling to use its own ground troops in the field to combat against the IS forces. This brings the issue of Iraq's *sahwa* (awakening) councils to our attention. Backed by U.S. and local security forces, since early 2007, Iraq's local tribal *sahwa* councils had been fighting against the ISI in the Sunni areas of Iraq. The *sahwa* militia proved to be effective against the ISI between 2007 and 2009. However, when the U.S. had started to withdraw its military forces from Iraq in June 2009, the *sahwa* councils were completely ignored. Thus, local forces in Syria and Iraq, regardless of the fact that they are either part of the *sahwa* councils or not, do not appear to be capable of launching serious attacks on the IS forces (Lister, 2014: 9-10). Considering the shaky situation in Iraq and Syria, currently the central Iraqi and Syrian governments appear to be incapable of launching an attack on the IS forces. The Kurds in the north have shown significant resistence against the IS forces; however it is not also very likely for them to launch a counteroffensive against the IS and drive the IS away from those territories, which will require them to move further south, an area where the Kurds do not have much strength and control over strategic sources.

7. CONCLUSION

Despite the sudden growth of the IS, it is not highly likely for the IS to expand any further (the reasons are briefly discussed in the previous sections). Here, the Kobani defeat of the IS might demarcate the natural boundaries of the organization. Additionally, Al-Baghdadi's death (though still speculated) might have damaged the morale of the group significantly. Due to four major reasons it appears evident that the U.S. is highly likely to intervene through airstrikes if the IS overextends its activities in the region: i) The U.S. would not want to allow a newly emerging actor like the IS to drastically upset the current status-quo in the region, unless it is in the interests of the U.S. to allow the inclusion of new actors like the IS in the new status-quo, ii) for a variety of domestic and international reasons on the part of the U.S., the U.S. must appear victorious in the war on global terror; thus, it is not going to allow the IS to expand any further, iii) the West in general, and the U.S. in specific can not risk the steady flow of oil from the region, and iv) the U.S., for the time being, does not want to be perceived as leaving its allies alone concerning the current balance of power in the region. Because of these reasons, if the IS overextends its activities in the region, the

U.S. is highly likely to intervene, as it happened during the IS attack on Kobani. However, it does not necessarily mean that the IS is going to disappear soon. The IS and several other similar sub-state groups will most likely never disappear completely; instead, they are going to recede to rural areas and small towns where they can survive relying on local, tribal and sectarian networks out of the central governments' reach. Thus, in the long term, such groups will continue to survive no matter what happens at varying degrees of activism and strength.

Considering the weakness of Iraqi and Syrian central governments, and the disadvantages of the *sahwa* councils and Kurdish groups against the IS, it appears that existing strategy against the IS in the region is far away from producing positive outcomes in the foreseeable future. Then, the question of what is to be done must be answered. *First*, the IS's ability to launch large scale attacks must be curtailed by airstrikes. In this case, the IS will possibly revert to sustaining smaller attacks through the use of terrorist tactics, i.e. car bombs and suicide attacks. Those types of attacks could be effective in the short run; however they would not provide decisive victories for the IS. *Second*, groups that oppose the IS in the region must be supported. The Sunni and Shi'a tribes that do not get along well with the IS (like the *sahwa* councils) must be supported because without their cooperation, it is very difficult to form a defensive and/or offensive block against the IS. *Third*, the moderate opposition groups in Syria and the Iraqi central government and their military capabilities must be supported. *Fourth*, the IS's revenue generating operations must be prevented. The IS generates $2 million to $3 million per day from illegal oil sales, smuggling, extortion, human trafficking, and other illegal activities. These activities must be curbed to effectively combat the IS. It is evident that without steady flow of revenues, the IS will have serious difficulties in keeping its fighters within its ranks and in recruiting new ones. *Fifth*, the flow of IS fighters into the region must be taken under control which will require a large international cooperation of several countries, especially of those neighboring Iraq and Syria, including Turkey, Jordan, S. Arabia and even Syria, which can only be succeeded through successful diplomacy. *Sixth*, the social media activities of the IS must be prevented. The IS greatly benefits from the social media in propaganda, recruitment and communication. If its social media operations are disrupted, it will be more difficult for the IS to recruit new members and conduct propaganda. *Seventh*, the politico-religious discourse of the IS must be countered by qualified moderate Sunni scholars who have extensive knowledge of the region, its people and culture very well. The IS mostly draws its members from the Sunni Arab communities in Syria and Iraq. Thus, reputable and revered Sunni scholars of the region must join into the effort to combat IS fanaticism and radicalism.

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