

# ISIS and the Crisis in Syria

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This paper traces the growth of ISIS from its roots in the 1990's to its current ambition to form an orthodox Caliphate. I will also briefly outline the history of Syria in order to understand the ISIS challenge to the authoritarian Syrian government and the ethnic tensions and Western interests which serve to fuel the current civil war.

## **Syria**

Jordan, Syria, Palestine (and Israel), Lebanon and Iraq, commonly called the Middle East today, form what was once known as the Levant. Syria's capital city Damascus, is one of human civilization's oldest cities dating back to the Neolithic cultures of 10,000 BCE. In fact, the earliest evidence of cattle breeding and language, in this case Eblaite, were found in Syria. Over the millennia, Assyrians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Armenians, Hittites, Romans, Mongols, Umayyads and Mamluks have ruled the region. The majority of the population are Arab Sunni Muslims but significant minorities include Alawaites (Sh'ias), Druze, (Lebanese Sh'ias), Christians, Armenians, Kurds, Yezidis and Turks. In 1516 CE, the Ottoman Turks annexed Syria and each community formed a 'millet' which controlled personal and civil law. In 1831, Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt briefly captured Damascus, bringing in Egyptians to populate the plains and suppressing the native Druze. In 1864, the Ottomans who had reclaimed Syria, introduced the Tanzimat reforms carving out new provinces.

## **Broken Promises**

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire was fast crumbling and Syrians and other Arabs wanted to be free of the empire. Six weeks before the Ottoman Empire entered World War I, Lord Kitchener, British Minister of War, approached Sharief Hussein in Mecca to enlist Arab support for the Allies against the Ottomans. The British hinted that they would support Sharief Hussein as Grand Sharief of

Mecca and in future an Arab Caliphate was a possibility. This hint was also dropped to Ibn Saud of Nejd and all but confirmed by MacMohan in his letter dated October 24, 1915. The British subsequently declared that they had never clarified that the Syrian Mediterranean, Aleppo and Lebanon would be included in this Arab state. In fact, whilst dropping these broad hints to secure Arab support, the British and French were actually secretly deciding how they would share out the Ottoman territories after World War I ended. This secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 in fact allowed Britain and France to fix the borders of modern Syria, but the plan was hidden. Unaware, the Arabs kept their part of the deal and revolted under Sharief Hussein against the Ottomans in June 1916. By November, his supporters were calling Hussein the 'King of the Arab Countries'.

Naturally, the Levant populations were bitterly disappointed when they were hustled into British and French Mandates after the Great War. Anti-British and anti-French sentiments were running high and thus the French, in charge of Syria, declared the Hashemite King Faisal I as king of Syria in 1920 hoping to placate the local population. But rebellions broke out with startling regularity and thus in 1936; the French-Syrian Treaty of Independence was signed. But the French parliament refused to ratify the treaty and in 1941, with World War II in progress, Free French and British troops occupied Syria. Finally in 1946, international pressure forced France to grant Syria independence.

But instability raged on. The creation of the Jewish state of Israel in the British mandated Palestine added to the volatility of the region as local populations grappled with unaccustomed borders and often unpopular kings. Between 1948 and 1954 Syria saw 4 coups, some military backed. In 1956 with Nasser's Arab Nationalism sweeping the Arab world, Syria drew closer to Egypt and her newest ally, the USSR. In 1958, Syria joined the Nasser sponsored United Arab Republic. This not only upset Western Allies but within Syria, opposition to the Egyptian dominated UAR grew in the form of the

Ba'at Party and in 1963, the Ba'atists seized power. Syria faced more upheavals as Israel seized the Golan Heights from her and faced defeat by Israel in the Yom Kippur War of 1976. In retaliation, Syria actively supported the Palestine Liberation Organization and annoyed her neighbour Lebanon by seizing territory under the excuse of defending it from Israel. These failures along with a Socialist leaning policy earned the Ba'at government in Syria and other Arab states Islamist critics who considered these policies and friendship with the communist USSR as un-Islamic. This religious opposition crystallized in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood formed in the 1970's.

### **Dictatorship and dissent**

In 1971, Hafez al Assad, a Ba'athist of the minority Shi'a Alawite community came to power in Syria un-opposed in a Presidential election. To appease Muslim opposition, al Assad granted important government posts to Sunnis went on Haj and often used the term 'Jihad' while rallying support against Israel. He got rid of his other Ba'at opponents and called his government the National Progressive Front. He was re-elected unopposed every 7 years and remained dictator of Syria for 37 years. Yet, his 1973 constitution was deemed "un-Islamic" especially by many Sunni Arabs and the Muslim Brotherhood led several rebellions against him. The minority Alawite community, to which he belonged, became the target of attacks and in 1980 there was a bid to assassinate him. In retaliation, al Assad unleashed the Syrian army on cities like Hama and Homs and other Muslim Brotherhood areas which were the centres of Islamic protest. He successfully used the army, Alawites, Christian Arabs and the salaried middle class to counterbalance his opponents. His success at damming the Euphrates river greatly increased cultivable land thus earning him important peasant support too.

But elsewhere al Assad's problems were mounting. The Syrian economy was plagued by state control, corruption and smuggling. Partnerships with the collapsing USSR, Egypt, the PLO, Iran (in the

Iran-Iraq War), and adventures in Lebanon proved costly, chronic problems and also resulted in the US bombing of Syria in the 1980's. To cling to power, al Assad announced economic liberalization in 1991 and joined the US sponsored co-alition against Saddam Hussein, but these met with limited success. Also in the 1990's al Assad began building a support base for his son Bashar al Assad (currently President of Syria), to succeed him. After al Assad's death in 2000, Bashar succeeded him as dictator-President of Syria.

### **ISIS (Islamic State Iraq and Syria)**

In 1989 Abu Musab al Zarqawi, a Jordanian, gathered a group of fighters to join the US sponsored Mujahideen in Afghanistan. Ever since the USSR spread its communist control over Afghanistan, the US began an unofficial policy of pumping funds and weapons into Islamic militant groups who could, and did, eventually bring down communism in Afghanistan. Once the Soviets were successfully destroyed, these Islamic militant groups trained their guns on the next big obstacle in their quest for power; the USA and her Western Allies. In the late 1990's, Zarqawi was part of a terror camp in Afghanistan where he met Osama bin Ladin and other Mujahideen groups. In 2001 he travelled to Iraq and during the US led Iraq War, he set up the Jamat al Tawhid wal Jihad which attacked mainly Sh'ia Muslims whose power grew as Saddam Hussein was defeated. Ironically, it was Saddam Hussein, Hafez al Assad and other such dictators who had kept Islamist groups in check, but after their fall, jihadi groups including Al Qaeda and ISIS began to operate in these areas. Zarqawi renamed his terror outfit AQI (Al Qaeda Iraq) but though Osama bin Ladin's Al Qaeda considered Sh'ias heretics, it was not happy to see Muslims targetting Muslims.

By 2006 Zarqawi was imposing strict Sharia law in the areas he dominated and proposed himself as the future 'Caliph', in other words, a politico-religious head. But in June 2006, Zarqawi was killed by US bombing. By the end of 2006, the US was desperate to get out of Iraq

and as US coalition troops began to withdraw, Sunni-Sh'ia hostilities resumed. The US installed Shia dominated government in Iraq repressed Sunnis and left many former Sunni soldiers and officers jobless. Thus AQI returned under Abu Bakr al Bagdadi. Bagdadi renamed his group ISI or Islamic State of Iraq. Besides civilian Sh'ias, the ISI also attacked police and military posts, government buildings etc. Several ex-soldiers of the Saddam regime also joined ISI, turning the organization into a quasi-army. Strengthened, the ISI moved next door to Syria and soon seized leadership of popular rebellions against President Bashar al Assad. The group successfully seized control of the city of Homs and re-named itself ISIS, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, (they also sometimes refer to themselves as ISIL or Islamic State in Levant). It exhorted all 'true' Muslims to do their duty by defeating heretics (in their definition Shi'as, other minorities, Christians and Western powers), and re-establish an Islamic Caliphate. ISIS often employs the historical fact that after World War I, the victorious Allies forced the Ottoman Caliph to abdicate thus ending the Islamic Caliphate. It is their premise, that they are only re-instating what was unfairly taken away and in any case, this new Caliphate will be a truer one since it will be led by Arabs. This then forms not only their call to local Sunni Muslims in Iraq, Syria and the Middle East, but it also serves to recruit jihadis from all over the world. As a result, ISIS set up base in southern Iraq and Syria.

In 2014 President Assad seized Homs back marking the beginning of the current Civil War in Syria but ISIS captured the oil rich city of Mosul and Bagdadi proclaimed himself the Caliph.

ISIS has been bolstered by numerous Mujahedeen fighters from the West and world over, aggressive online recruitment campaigns, ex-Iraqi soldiers and spectacular victories particularly in oil rich areas which assure it finance. It has made a practice out of beheading Western hostages, destroying historical treasures like the city of Palmira and forcing minority women like the Yazedis into slavery.

Since this paper was first researched and presented, ISIS has been commanded by Haji Bakr and has taken control of key cities and oil producing areas including Aleppo, Tikrit, Baiji, Raqqa, al Omar, Shaer, Zumar, Sinjar and Tal Keif. ISIS has claimed responsibility for several terrorist attacks in the West culminating in Paris in November 2015. Until then, numerous Shi'a groups like the Hezbollah, minority tribes and the Syrian and Iraqi army were waging what looked like a losing battle against ISIS. Russian attempts to actively help President Bashar and urging other Western Allies to do the same were met with excuses and even criticism. Indeed the USA has not been keen to commit troops in the Middle East so soon after its recent involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. France, England and other EU nations have been likewise shy of active involvement. But the Paris attacks and the unprecedented refugee crisis seems to have changed this half-hearted response. A resurgent Russia led by Vladimir Putin and a badly stung France have already actively begun supporting the Syrian Army's anti-ISIS campaigns and these already appear to be bearing fruit with significant victories. Western involvement once again raises unresolved questions...can the West afford another (mis)adventure in the Middle East? In the long run, will it strengthen the resolve of jihadi groups to target the West? Is it ethical to prop up a dictator like Bashar al Assad just because ISIS seems a more dangerous threat? Once ISIS is defeated, and it will be in my opinion, when and where in the Middle East will the next jihadi group surface? (That too, in my opinion, is inevitable). These dilemmas have long plagued the Middle East where the potent mix of religion, oil money and violence render longterm settlements and peace a distant dream.

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