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Understanding the Complex Underlying Causes of the Rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria

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Understanding the Complex Underlying Causes of the Rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria

An Honors College Thesis

by

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Political Science

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Date

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Abstract:

How can we understand the complex underlying causes of the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria? Did the United States create a “vacuum” in the Middle East that allowed ISIS to come to power? To what extent if true, is this argument a simplification?

This thesis will argue that there were in fact multiple variables that led to the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. From a historical aspect, it will examine the regimes within two the countries, analyzing the complex nature of each. This will explain the oppression that many faced. This thesis will also examine the political chaos that dates back decades. The ethnic divide within Syria and Iraq will also be discussed. Analyzing these complex factors will show how ISIS came to power in the Middle East.

Introduction:

It was a sunny day on the 11th of September 2001. Many were going about their day as usual. School was in session, many were on their way to work, and the hustle and bustle of New York City was as thriving as ever. In an instant, that all changed. The televisions switched from regularly scheduled programs to their “breaking news screens” bringing the news into households- a plane had struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center. As black smoke began to fill the air, another plane struck the South Tower of the world trade center. It was at this point; Americans knew they were under attack. It was a terrorist attack, and the deadliest attack that had ever occurred on U.S soil. Another plane had struck the Pentagon, while another plane had been hijacked and was headed for the White House.

When the day was over, there would be a total of four hijackings, three buildings would be completely leveled, and just fewer than 3,000 lives were lost. The days following the attacks consisted of first responders and volunteers working together to find those who were missing, identifying those who passed away, and suffering themselves in the process. In the years following the attacks, the people who helped would face severe health issues such as lung cancer, brain cancer, asthma, neuropathy, and other illnesses, stemming from breathing in toxins at ground zero. America was at war.

The events of September 11, 2001 changed the nation entirely. Security around the country was stepped up at airports, bridges, and landmarks. There was a constant fear that the next attack was right around the corner. The attacks of 9/11 resulted in the Bush administration going to war with Afghanistan. It was an attempt to combat the war on terror- in particular to take out Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. Thousands of American troops were deployed to Afghanistan where a long battle lay ahead.

The United States and Iraq have had a tumultuous relationship. There have been instances throughout history where the U.S. and Iraq were on the same side, and there have been instances where the two have disagreed.

In March 2002, Bush called for an invasion of Iraq. In an effort to rid Iraq of its leader Saddam Hussein and the “weapons of mass destruction,” American forces were deployed. In April 2003, Saddam Hussein was overthrown at the hand of America. The people of Iraq were liberated from his authoritarian rule. However, this would pose an even bigger dilemma. The toppling of the regime left the Iraqi people without a government. The Americans tried to instill a democratic state, but it was proving to not

be successful. This was due to the ethnic, religious and political divide within the country, as well as a complete lack of familiarity with democratic institutions.

At the same time, protestors in Damascus and other Arab nations were rising up against their governments. They sought change after being politically and ethnically oppressed too. The divide between the numerous religious sects in Syria began to take its toll. It became evident that creating a democratic state was not the only dilemma that was at hand. The oppression between each ethnic group needed to be addressed as well. People were calling for change, but the leader of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, would not listen. Civil wars broke out. They revolted. People were looking for a sense of identity they felt they had lost. Many took up arms in exchange for their lives. The Assad regime would put a stop to the uprisings, by any means necessary.

In order to understand the chaos occurring in both Iraq and Syria today, one must look at the history of each region. Iraq had to deal with tensions between the Sunni and Shi'ia. Tensions between the two groups have resulted in unrest in the state over the years. In Syria, differences among numerous religious sects have resulted in tensions throughout history. Economic strife, political oppression, and religious turmoil erupted all at once in Syria. Both Iraq and Syria were in fragile states. The people of each country were dividing at an accelerated rate too. This created the perfect storm. There was no better time for an insurgent terrorist group to gain control.

Many have argued that the United States pulled out of Iraq too quickly, leaving a weak model government in place. Unfortunately, the United States and Iraq could not reach many agreements on how to govern. While the United States offered support for a period of time, members of Iraq sought to rule the country their own way. As a result of

this, the Islamic State formed- gaining control in several regions in the Middle East. It is clear that the failure of democracy and the United States' role in Iraq were not the only reasons to blame for the formation of ISIS. A key part of the problem was the complete dismantling of the entire Iraqi state. Failure in rebuilding Iraq served as an open-door for militant group to come to power.

The United States occupation of Iraq and then public support for a horrific Shi'ia regime in Iraq was another driver for the creation of radicalized groups such as ISIS. This resulted in the United States and the West being their primary targets.

Many have argued that Islamic militant groups are primarily focused on anti-US and anti-Western goals. However, Iraq and Syria show there are two other important factors: the first factor being the origins and drivers of these groups are largely a function of local dynamics like instability, power vacuums, and sectarian rivalries at the local and regional level. The second factor and driver of Islamic militancy is the oppressive dynamic set up by authoritarian regimes where by people, ideas, and religion is squashed.

The regions of the Middle East have dealt with oppressive regimes since the 1940's. The political climate, ethnic divide among different sects, and a thirst for change have proven to be driving factors in the development of the civil wars. The civil war in Syria has been detrimental to foreign policy, and has been a crucial player in ISIS' rise to power. The failure of intervention in the Syrian Civil War on behalf of international players such as the United States and Britain have also led to ISIS' rise in power in the region. While this statement holds true, it is a mere simplification of the issues at hand.

Western European rule in Mesopotamia: History of the Middle East:

In order to understand the complexity of the Middle East, one must look at the history of the region. There have been long standing tensions between the Sunni and the Shi'ia in Middle Eastern territories such as Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Iran and so forth. Tensions date back to the year 632, when the Prophet Mohammed passed away. Disagreements ensued between two Islamic groups over who should succeed the prophet. To this day, there is no definitive resolution. The Middle Eastern territories were also colonies under British and French rule. The invasion of the British and the French divided the countries to a greater extent. Mandates were set up to control different areas. Within those areas, different religious and ethnic sects already existed. This drove a deeper wedge between them.

The British were invaders of an Ottoman and Islamic territory that were considered enemies of the British Empire. (Fieldhouse, 2006) The majority of the Islamic population of Iraq was Shi'ia, whereas most Syrians were Sunnis. (Fieldhouse, 2006) The first discrepancy was that the great majority of Iraqis were still loyal to the British, and many of them were fighting, on the side of the British, as infidels, attacking the Caliph. (Fieldhouse, 2006) For the Shi'ia majority who did not accept the concept of a Sunni Caliph, the British were as equally hated. (Fieldhouse, 2006) They were considered non-believers- many of their clerics wanted a theocracy. (Fieldhouse, 2006) The issue of loyalty played into the pre-existing religious tensions. This fueled the fighting.

In Baghdad, the central government headed by the Civil Commissioner had five major departments under British secretaries. (Fieldhouse, 2006) Regional governments consisted initially of sixteen divisions (liwas) into which the three Ottoman provinces had

been divided, subdivided into districts (qadhas) and sub-districts (nahiyas.) (Fieldhouse, 2006) The appointed political officers and their subordinates controlled these districts. (Fieldhouse, 2006) This replicated the British-Indian pattern. (Fieldhouse, 2006) Iraq was a poor country at this point. Iraq depended on continued military action in order to generate some money. (Fieldhouse, 2006)

1920–1921 proved to be a critical time in the choice of regimes. (Fieldhouse, 2006) The choice of regime in Iraq, as in all European dependencies, depended very heavily on the nature of the society and its response to the unexpected and uninvited British presence. (Fieldhouse, 2006) Would a regime be established in Iraq that valued military action against Britain?

When the British and the French decided to leave the region permanently, both powers failed to recognize the different sects of the populations. Figuratively speaking, the French and the British drew lines on a map to equally distribute the land, and failed to take into account these crucial religious and ethnic sects that were already established. These actions have left those in the Middle East divided and angry. The question in and after 1918 was whether it would prove sustainable in the longer term. (Fieldhouse, 2006)

Arab nationalism had penetrated Iraq by 1914. (Fieldhouse, 2006) In Syria, it existed among certain circles and was intensified by the return of the Iraqi officers and others in and after 1920. (Fieldhouse, 2006) Both countries made their bid for freedom in 1919–1920.

Emergence of the Ba'th Party:

“While such deep lines of division are familiar elsewhere in the Arab world, in Syria they seem to have assumed a particular significance because of the diversity and fragmentation of the society and the weakness of the political centre. This fragmentation is evident in a deep chasm between city and countryside, in regional rivalries and animosities, and most prominently, in the population’s communal structure.” (Rabinovich, 1972)

The Arab Socialist Renaissance Party (also known as the Ba'th Party) was officially established in 1953, but had roots outside of Syria that dated back to 1941. (Rabinovich, 1972) The movement as it was considered then, was led by Michel ‘Aflaq and Salah al-Bitar. An emerging sector of the current political intellectual circle that existed in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East, the Ba’ath party gained recognition during a pivotal period in Middle Eastern history. Turkey had acquired Alexandretta (1939,) and the campaign to aid the Rashid’ Ali movement in Iraq was on the verge of emergence. The members of Alexandretta followed a prominent opposition leader by the name of Gamel Abdel Nasser to Egypt. He gained popularity among all Arab nations for his anti-British demonstrations. He would later become the first president of the Republic of Egypt and play a key role in the establishment of the United Arab Nations. Members of the Ba'th Party would use some of Nasser’s tactics to establish a solid following in Syria. However, there were many problems that occurred while establishing this party.

The first problem was that the ideology of the Ba’ath party was rooted in nationalistic views that promoted the Arabs becoming a single eternal nation.

(Rabinovich, 1972) However, there were many contradictions between the constitution that was drafted by the Ba'ath party and the laws followed under Islam. As the party became more prominent, these contradictions became more apparent. The party itself followed secular tendencies as it sought to include Arabs of all religions. (Rabinovich, 1972) The constitution was essentially a nationalist doctrine. Unities, Freedom, Socialism were principles the party campaigned upon. The slogan adhered to numerous people during this time. (Rabinovich, 1972) The future state under the Ba'th would model a democratic parliamentary regime- guaranteeing freedom and social justice. (Rabinovich, 1972) The contradictions and weakness of the constitution, along with weak notions of "party" posed a serious problem for unification. (Rabinovich, 1972) Compromises between the religious doctrine and drafted constitution could solve the unification dilemma. So Nasser and the Ba'th party combined nationalist and socialist ideas in order to gain political power. This appealed to a younger, more radical crowd, as well as appealing to members of the older generation.

Nasser's influence grew in 1956, particularly in Damascus. Despite minor disagreements between the members of the emerging Ba'th Party and Nasser, they sought to pursue the same goal of drawing a great distinction between Egypt/Syria and the West by pursuing a more Arab policy. (Rabinovich, 1972) The growth of the Nasserites gave the Ba'th an ally in the political game. The allied regime would then enter into an agreement with Egypt- forming the United Arab Regime.

With the formation of the United Arab Regime, the Ba'th Party itself was finally unified. Nasser remained President of Egypt, however pre-existing friction between Nasser and members of the Ba'th party would not cease. The event preceding the

unification would shape Syrian politics as it is recognized today. Shortly after unification, Nasser and Syria split. The United Arab Republic failed and ultimately led to a division within Syrian politics. Nasser believed that politics should be free of military officials-whereas military officials were embedded in the politics of Syria.

The period after the split between the Ba’th party and the United Arab Republic became known as the Separatist (or Secessionist) Period. (Rabinovich, 1972) President Nasser refused to acknowledge the Separatists. This refusal, along with the Separatists’ attempting to gain recognition on the political level, caused unwarranted pressure. (Rabinovich, 1972) Following the succession, a significant coup occurred. This was a direct result of the friction between the Ba’th and Nasser.

On March 28, 1962, the Separatist regime staged a “corrective” coup against the government that existed in Syria. (Rabinovich, 1972) In an attempt to install a more obedient civilian government and a tougher army, the coup only drove a deeper wedge between Nasser and the Party. (Rabinovich, 1972) Months of political change and reconciliation followed. Elections were held as the Homs Congress and the military politicians came to agreements. (Rabinovich, 1972) It became clearer that the Ba’th party would have to back Nasser one way or another in order to succeed. Another party formed from this decision- the social unionists. (Rabinovich, 1972) By the summer of 1962, the Ba’th Party in Syria was divided into four distinct groups. Haurani and his faction was one that supported the existing order of Fifth National Congress. (Rabinovich, 1972) The congress emerged as a result of the March 28th coup. (Rabinovich, 1972)

COUPS that Shaped Syria:

“Three Baathist military seizures of power altered beyond recognition the Syrian political landscape- the first came in 1963, the second in 1966, and the third in 1970. The concentration of power grew more extreme in the course of this...”
(Ajami, 2012)

The first coup d'état was driven by ideology. (Ajami, 2012) The members of the Ba'th party sought to uphold an order embedded in nationalism, while proving themselves on a political scale. (Ajami, 2012) These men focused on origin- including Ismalis, Druze, Alawis, and Sunnis who had been oppressed under the United Arab Republic. (Ajami, 2012) On the other hand, the communists in the region were battling for a greater sense of Syrian nationalism. (Ajami, 2012) They had failed. A decree to settle the dispute was drafted, established, and would remain law for the next six decades. (Ajami, 2012) At this point, rival political parties had been swept aside. (Ajami, 2012)

“The events of February 23, 1966 produced the deepest and most important schism in the history of the Ba'th Party...”(Rabinovich, 1972)

It was no surprise that the divide between the general Syrian population and the government infested with military officials grew wider as the years went on. Radicalism solidified itself in the general political climate following the coup. (Rabinovich, 1972) As the radicalism intensified, it became a distinct characteristic of the political scene in Syria. The Syrian government was now completely intertwined with corrupt military officials. The Ba'th regime was hardly accepted by large segments of Syria's urban population prior to the coup, and the public image of the new ruling group made it even

less so. (Rabinovich, 1972) According to Rabinovich, the coup narrowed the political basis of the regime.

The solidification of the Ba'th party after the 1966 coup changed the political and social dynamic of Syria. As tensions between the urban population and the new leaders grew, the dissatisfaction among the population became even more apparent. (Rabinovich, 1972) Hostility among the different sects of the population grew as well. The government officials did not take into account the many sects that occupied Syria. For example, Sunni Arab Muslims were a paramount element in Syria and constituted about sixty percent of the population. (Rabinovich, 1972) Other national sects included various religious and ethnic minorities: approximately fifteen percent were Christians, eleven percent was Alwais, three percent were Druses, and the Isma'ilis group constituted one percent. (Rabinovich, 1972) In addition, Kurds constituted eight percent, Armenians made up four percent, and Turkomans and Circassians made up three percent of the population as well. (Rabinovich, 1972) The growing upset challenged upcoming leaders, by instilling a sense of weakness. (Rabinovich, 1972) The powerful military regime could not control the people of its country. In response to the dissatisfaction, the regime took action. They turned to radical measures in order to certify their position within the Syrian government. (Rabinovich, 1972)

The third coup d'état occurred in 1970. This coup was crucial because it ended the cyclic military advance to power that had coincided with Syrian politics since the start of the regime in 1949. (Ajami, 2012) Hafez al-Assad became the new leader of the Ba'th political party in Syria. He would give his country stability, but it would come at a terrible price according to Ajami. The political instability of the past allowed Hafez to

rule as he pleased. Syrians viewed this as a form of stability within the regime, which was something they were unfamiliar with. Hafez appeared to be reasonable and sincere. However, that was not the case. He would prove to be extremely dangerous. He would go to great extents to make sure he stayed in power.

The Syrian Ba‘th regime, and the presidency that headed it, rested on three overlapping pillars of power: the party apparatus, the military-police establishment, and the ministerial bureaucracy. (Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015) The president, the party general secretary and armed forces commander in chief, held the legal and political reins of all three pillars of power, and had numerous powers of command. Each played a crucial role in policy innovation. (Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015)

The trail of violence that had first appeared in the 1960’s would remain under the mask that Hafez al-Assad shaped so well. (Ajami, 2012) Political prisoners under his command were being killed for disagreeing with him. (Ajami, 2012) It became quite clear that Hafez al-Assad was nothing more than a ruthless dictator. Syrians now had to tread lightly-to a much greater extent than before. His reign lasted until 2000, when he passed away. His son, Bashar al-Assad would take over as President of Syria.

Assad and his Syria:

“In order to understand the dynamics of the uprising and its specificity in relation to previous forms of resistance and opposition against the Baathist regime, it is necessary to look at the transformations that the authoritarian system suffered under the decade of Assad’s rule. The transformations in the forms of governance—that is, in the ways that the government produced social consent to its political project—gradually marginalized some sectors of the population, allowing the emergence of new political actors and arenas for opposition to the regime.” (Prashad and Amar, 2013)

While ISIS was gaining power in Iraq, civil war was knocking at Syria’s door. Dissatisfaction with Bashar-Al-Assad was growing within Syria. However, the dissatisfaction had been built from previous decades, dating back to the rule of Hafez- Al Assad- Bashar’s father. His rise to power completed the process Hafez al-Assad had begun of establishing his son as his successor. (Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015) For the first time since the revolution, the president did not have a significant previous history in party politics. (Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015) Yet the regime elite collectively engineered the succession. (Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015) Having a hold on the top party and army positions and closed ranks, allowed Assad to preserve regime stability and prevent an intra-elite power struggle. (Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015) All power was invested in Bashar. (Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015)

Political dissent had been effectively contained by the Syrian regime through a combination of repression and limited inclusion of social actors into the state. (Abboud,

2015) But socioeconomic decline, political inertia, and the continued state of emergency in Syria that had been in place since the 1960s all provided the basis for the articulation of political grievances and the mobilization of segments of the population within the broader context of the Arab uprisings. (Abboud, 2015) The mobilization of the 2011 period was markedly different than previous periods. (Abboud, 2015)

Before the protests began in 2011, Assad began to dissect and revamp Syrian foreign policy. He sought to become a key player among other nations. The revolts in Tunisia and Egypt would influence the Syrian population greatly. The people of Tunisia and Egypt overthrew their dictators, sparking a revolution. It was only a matter of time before the same feelings of outrage and nationalism reached Syria.

Syrians began to speak out against Assad and his regime. Political parties and patronage networks began to gain support around key issues and political demands. (Abboud, 2015) While he was establishing diplomatic ties with other countries, the people in his own were suffering. Many remained oppressed, ethnically, religiously, and politically. The corporatist relations that supported the Ba'athist model of development had begun to shift, however. (Abboud, 2015) In the absence of independent political parties or an autonomous civil society, there were no institutions for the expression and mobilization of political grievances. (Abboud, 2015) Assad sent many of those who voiced their opinion to the notorious Mezze Prison. (Ajami, 2012)

Political prisons had become a distinct part of Syrian life, dating back to the rule of Hafez- Al Assad. (Ajami, 2012) It didn't take much to land in one of these prisons. (Ajami, 2012) A wrong word uttered in public, a rumor, an association with an outlawed political group, would land a Syrian in prison. (Ajami, 2012) The political system rooted

in oppression angered Syrians. The people took to the streets and this became known as the Syrian rebellion/ Arab Spring Uprising. By 2012, the rebellion had engulfed towns around the capital. (Ajami, 2012)

The Arab Revolt was not just the emergence of new social forces within nation-states Prashad and Amar claimed. (Prashad and Amar, 2013) According to them, there were three crucial moments that shaped the Arab Spring revolution and influenced the Syrian people to take action:

“Moment 1: The Arab Spring, the jubilant rise of the people of Tunisia and Egypt, with expectations of a rapid collapse of the despotic regimes from the Atlas to the Qandil Mountains. The departure of Ben Ali and Mubarak are emblematic, but so too is the resignation of Yemen’s Saleh. Few expected that these authoritarian leaders and their families would be forced out. The regimes did not depart, but the apex of the kleptocracy was certainly removed. That Arab Spring continues, unfurling banners of hope among the demonstrators in Amman, Jordan, and in the Occupied Territories of the Palestinians—unfinished endeavors linked to the hopefulness of the spring of 2011. (Prashad and Amar, 2013)

Moment 2: The Arab Winter, the entry of the Gulf Cooperation Council (primarily Saudi troops) into Bahrain and NATO missions (primarily funded by Qatar) over the skies of Libya, with the irrepressible repression in Syria and the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, with its land grab in the West Bank. Expectations of the renaissance withered, even after the fall of the Qaddafi regime in Libya. Fears of civil war and retribution lurked at every turn, sentiments that were not

present after the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak. Older animosities took advantage of the stalled social development: sectarianism reared its head and threatened to eclipse the forward motion of the Arab Spring. (Prashad and Amar, 2013)

Moment 3: The Arab Resurgence, the new regimes' efforts with the creation of democracy (in the form of halting and tightly circumscribed elections) and the holding off of the policies of neoliberal consumer-ism foisted on them by a relentless IMF and the Atlantic powers (now emboldened by their Libyan adventure and by their rhetorical flourish over the bloodbath in Syria). Strikes and demonstrations returned with a vengeance to become commonplace in Egypt and Tunisia, in Yemen and Bahrain. Political Islamists began to substitute their antagonistic relationship to the regime with disputed programs for governance...What we saw in this moment were political forces trying at record speed to create spaces in their societies for active and energetic political debate and practice, something suspended during the bureaucratic despotisms that these forces were trying to break down. “ (Prashad and Amar, 2013)

While the Arab Revolts were gaining recognition, Syria was inching on a revolt of its own. The influence from the Arab Spring revolts did spill over into Syria, as Prashad and Amar mentioned. Now, the Syrians wanted changed. The move toward creating a broad opposition coalition culminated in the Damascus Declaration, a document envisioning democratic change in Syria. (Abboud, 2015) The Damascus Declaration was first drafted in October of 2005. The Declaration expressed commitment to four guiding principles— nonviolence, democracy, oppositional unity, and democratic change— and

was signed by five party coalitions, civil society groups, and a number of public figures. (Abboud, 2015) Eventually, many other groups and individuals from Syria's pluralist opposition landscape- including communists, nationalists, and Kurdish nationalists, pledged allegiance to the Declaration. (Abboud, 2015) For the first time in the modern history of Syria's opposition, secular and Islamist groups, Kurdish and Arab nationalists, and others from across the political spectrum had legitimized each other and committed to collective change in Syria. (Abboud, 2015)

However, Assad claimed opposition forces were armed with firearms, explosives, and were brainwashing the people of Syria. He also claimed that these rebels were holding those who supported his regime hostage-and in some instances killing them. Syrians calling for him to be overthrown were classified as terrorists. Assad repeatedly called the rebels “Islamic” terrorists. At this time however, it was categorically NOT the case. There was a major difference between the rebels protesting his regime, and the followers of ISIS who were defined as Islamic terrorists. Those who were peacefully protesting in the Streets of Aleppo and Damascus were advocating for freedom and change within the regime.

March and April of 2011 were crucial months in the evolution of the uprising. (Abboud, 2015) While protesters were becoming more organized, the Syrian regime engaged in a two-sided response to the uprising. (Abboud, 2015) On the one hand, the regime enacted a series of cosmetic political reforms aimed at placating some of the protester's political demands. (Abboud, 2015) On the other hand, the security apparatus—the army, mukhabarat (intelligence services), police, and shabiha (thugs)—continued to engage in repression such as collective violence against protesters and against individuals

participating in protest activity through arbitrary imprisonment, beatings, torture, kidnapping, and murder. (Abboud, 2015) Agreements on the reforms presented were not met- nor were they taken seriously. (Abboud, 2015) Violence kept increasing, as patience among the Syrian opposition forces grew thin.

Widespread repression by the security apparatus had ultimately discouraged any form of nonviolent or violent collective action. (Abboud, 2015) Political gatherings of nonviolent activists sometimes leading to long prison terms handed down by Syria's security courts. (Abboud, 2015) There are at least five distinct social groupings (Abbas, 2011) that took part in the early protests and formed the dense social networks that sustained mobilization. (Abboud, 2015)

The following five social, ethnic and religious groups were distinct to the development of the uprisings in Syria. It was due to these groups that mobilization for the uprisings was possible. (Abboud, 2015)

1. Secular, educated, urban middle classes: This group consisted of mostly young people who were professionals or were involved in cultural activities. (Abboud, 2015) They were mostly university educated and came from urban or semi-urban centers and had very few political linkages to the exiled opposition or domestic political activists who made up the pre-uprising opposition. (Abboud, 2015) In the early stages of the uprising, this group was heavily involved in media related activities as well as organizing protesters on the ground. (Abboud, 2015)
2. Tribes (kinship based networks): It has been estimated that there are around 7.5 million Syrians (or 30 percent of the total population) of tribal background mostly concentrated in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqqa, al-Hasakeh, and Dar'a but also located in the

rural peripheries of Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, and Quneitra. Leenders and Heydemann have preferred to refer to these kinship networks as “clans” instead of tribes. (Abboud, 2015) These tribes were mostly concentrated in socioeconomically deprived areas. (Abboud, 2015) They had borne the brunt of years of drought and agricultural decline. (Abboud, 2015) Tribal leaders were instrumental in recruiting volunteers and protesters in the early stages of the uprising who could mobilize members based on existing socioeconomic grievances and historical exclusion from Ba'ath Party power. (Abboud, 2015) There has been no discernible political strategy from the tribes during the uprising, with some pledging allegiance to the opposition and others to the regime. (Abboud, 2015) The geographic concentration of the tribes has meant that they have been forced into conflict or partnerships with the main jihadist groups, Jabhat an-Nusra (JAN) and ISIS. (Abboud, 2015)

3. Political Islamists: Members of this group are adherents of political Islam. (Abboud, 2015) Their affiliations and allegiances, however, are very diverse and not confined to the main Syrian Islamist Party, the Muslim Brotherhood. (Abboud, 2015) As membership in the Brotherhood was punishable by death, many of their activists inside Syria had been forced underground and were largely unable to recruit and organize supporters. (Abboud, 2015) Thus, many of the protesters in this group can be considered to support and adhere to some version of political Islam. (Abboud, 2015) They were typically supporters of particular religious sheiks who supported the uprising, or they were compelled to activism and protest by their religious beliefs. In the initial stages of the uprising and

throughout its duration to the present, there has been no single Islamist party that dominated this group and offered a coherent vision and organizational structure. (Abboud, 2015) As Jabhat an-Nusra and ISIS entered the Syrian scene, many of the more militant activists from this grouping have migrated and joined them, while others who took up arms stayed in local, neighborhood groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army or other brigades. (Abboud, 2015) Many other Islamist activists have also remained active in non-violent strategies and have participated in local councils and administrative structures. (Abboud, 2015)

4. Political Activists: The suppression of formal party politics by the Syrian regime led to the suffocation of political activity in the decades preceding the uprising. (Abboud, 2015) Nevertheless, there were many independent, non-affiliated political figures within Syria who had more or less made up the domestic opposition during Ba'ath Party rule. (Abboud, 2015) These activists were mostly intellectuals, professionals, or businesspeople. (Abboud, 2015) Their main institutional expression came in the early 2000s with the Damascus Declaration and the call for greater political freedoms within Syria, which only invited heavier repression by the regime and the imprisonment of many of their members. (Abboud, 2015) This grouping also consisted of social activists, such as human rights or prisoner rights activists, as well as political activists from leftist and Kurdish groups. (Abboud, 2015) Some activists from this group had been active in regime-sanctioned civil society organizations prior to the uprising. (Abboud, 2015)

5. The Unemployed, Marginalized and Urban Subalterns: Unemployment and informality were key features of the Syrian economy before the uprising. (Abboud, 2015) The growing numbers of unemployed and underemployed Syrians grew considerably during the decade of marketization when public-sector opportunities effectively ceased, agricultural production plummeted, and the private sector was unable to provide jobs for the hundreds of thousands of Syrians entering the workforce each year. (Abboud, 2015) Informality and underemployment were not only urban phenomena but affected rural and semi-urban areas as well, leading to a slow migration of many job seekers to the peripheries of Syria's main cities. (Abboud, 2015) Many of these migrants lived in informal housing, which have been estimated as high as 40 percent of total housing in the urban peripheries. (Abboud, 2015) Many of these people, who were on the outside of economic reforms and had very few job prospects, shared the socioeconomic and political grievances of other protesters and were natural participants in the initial protest phases. (Abboud, 2015) Paradoxically, many Syrians in this grouping were also drawn into the shabiha and other paramilitary groups. (Abboud, 2015)

The militarization of the Syrian uprising began in June 2011 when army defectors formed brigades under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). (Abboud, 2015) Over the next few months, the main armed opposition in Syria grew under the FSA umbrella and quickly spread throughout the country with units and brigades emerging in major cities and in the rural peripheries. (Abboud, 2015) The militarization of the Syrian

uprising could be divided into two main factors. (Abboud, 2015) The first was that the sustained and brutal violence inflicted on protesters by the regime and its armed proxies consequently encouraged Syrians to take up arms. (Abboud, 2015) The second factor was the failure of the protests to initiate a political transition process, similar to what occurred in Tunisia and Egypt. . (Abboud, 2015) By the summer of 2011, the regime was committed to developing a military solution to the uprising. (Abboud, 2015) As violence increased, protests expanded. (Abboud, 2015)

The initial protests were strongly committed to nonviolence as a political strategy, but in the months following the uprising this would result in failure. (Abboud, 2015) As these debates were ongoing within opposition circles, groups of army defectors began forming in their respective locales and began confronting regime forces with violence. . (Abboud, 2015) Eventually, during the summer of 2011, these groups would form under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and represented the militarized opposition. . (Abboud, 2015)

The fragmentation of the militarized opposition and its effects can best be seen in the city of Aleppo. (Abboud, 2015) Here, all major coalitions exist. (Abboud, 2015) Aleppo is considered the most strategic region of Syria for numerous reasons. (Abboud, 2015) The first is due to the Turkish supply routes, which have been essential to the survival of the armed groups. (Abboud, 2015) Geographic control allows these groups to reap the benefits of the war economy and maintain their military entrenchment in Aleppo. (Abboud, 2015) The FSA's Command is strong in Aleppo but shares control of the no regime areas with the SILF, the SRF, PYD, and Jabhat an-Nusra, all major coalitions with affiliated brigades scattered throughout the city and its countryside. (Abboud, 2015)

Relations between these groups are rarely cooperative and they are mostly engaged in conflict with one another as they attempt to expand their geographic and military control. (Abboud, 2015) In addition to this, regime forces, including the SAA, NDF, and militia groups, are present in Aleppo. (Abboud, 2015) While the case of Aleppo is perhaps unique, it is indicative of the larger fragmentation and division of the militarized opposition. (Abboud, 2015) The city and its countryside are home to thousands of fighters, all of whom have fluid affiliations with larger units and brigades. (Abboud, 2015) Most fighters turn against each other and allow the regime forces to remain entrenched in the parts of the city under their control. (Abboud, 2015) All of these coalitions alternate between conflict and cooperation but are ultimately vying for as much control of the city as possible. (Abboud, 2015)

It wouldn't be too long before the streets of Aleppo and Damascus were flooded with chaos and violence. It was no longer a rebellion against the regime and oppression-it was a fight for existence for certain groups. (Ajami, 2012)

Iraq and the United States:

The system in the Middle East had been dominated by competition between Iran and multiple Arab powers such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria since World War II. After the British withdrew from east of Suez in 1971, the United States added Iran as a regional balancer to Soviet-backed radical states, creating a twin-pillar approach to regional security, in which both Iran and Saudi Arabia received significant military assistance and advanced weapon systems. (Wehrey, 2010)

Prior to the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979, the United States maintained strong military and political relations with Tehran, which also served as a balance to Soviet-supported Ba'athist Iraq. (Wehrey, 2010) But after the Iranian revolution, the United States supported Saddam Hussein and Iraq to counter Iranian influence during the Iraq-Iran war. (1980-1988) (Wehrey, 2010) Economic tensions were flaring between those involved. The Iraq-Iran war left Iraq in forty billion dollars of debt. Saddam Hussein asked Iran and other Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to forgive the debt. When no country agreed to forgive the debt, Hussein grew frustrated.

From a political standpoint, Saddam Hussein feared for the security of his country. He believed that other countries were trying to dismantle his regime. On August 2, 1990, Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait. President Bush spearheaded a campaign within the US and globally in response to the invasion. There was little support initially to counter Iraqi aggression, but Bush wanted to protect and assert a new world order with the end of the Cold War and he worked hard to drum up support. He was able to do so and the United States also received support from the United Nations Security Council. The

United Nations Security Council drafted resolutions authorizing the collective security action to overthrow Iraqi aggression.

Relations between the United States and Iraq had deteriorated. Actions to overthrow Iraqi aggression made the United States Saddam Hussein's number one enemy. Results of the resolutions included sanctions and no-fly zones, restricting Saddam's control in Iraq. The Persian Gulf War as it would later be referred to ended with an Iraqi defeat and retreat from Kuwait on February 28, 1991.

After the end of the Cold War and in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the United States changed its traditional offshore balancing stance to a direct, regional balancing role with its growing military presence in Saudi Arabia and the GCC states, this time to contain *both* Iran and Iraq, which became known as the dual-containment policy. (Wehrey, 2010)

Fast-forward twelve years to 2003 and George W. Bush is President of the United States. The attacks of 9/11 are still fresh in the minds of the American people. Troops have been deployed to Afghanistan to combat the terrorists who attacked the United States, and President Bush announces that the troops will be deployed to Iraq.

The United States and its allies such Australia, Poland, and the United Kingdom entered Iraq to liberate the Iraqi people. This became known as Operation Iraqi Freedom. According to U.S. intelligence, Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. From the gathered information (which was later deemed incorrect,) it was concluded that Hussein would use these weapons against the United State and its allies, in order to aid terrorists.

The fighting against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan that was occurring at the same time

served as a catalyst for entering Iraq. Intelligence had gathered information that claimed Iraq's actions had aided terrorists'. With Saddam Hussein ruthlessly ruling Iraq, the war in Afghanistan continuing to ensue, and the potential ties to terrorists' organization such as al-Qaeda, the Bush administration convinced the American people entering Iraq was necessary.

A U.S.-led coalition of about 250,00 troops, crossed the border from Kuwait into Iraq on March 19, 2003. (Katzman, 2014) After several weeks of combat, the regime of Saddam Hussein fell. (Katzman, 2014) The United States gained control of Baghdad. Following this event, Saddam Hussein was captured. This occurred on April 9, 2003. (Katzman, 2014) Operation Iraqi Freedom was s success-up until this point.

Speed Bumps on the Road to Democracy:

“Democracy provided the third rationale for the war. By itself, a democratic Iraq was a desirable objective... But the administration made no plans to provide security in post-Saddam Iraq. “ (Galbraith. 2006)

During the 2003-2011 presence of U.S. forces, Iraq completed a transition from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein to a pluralistic political system. (Katzman, 2014) The United States attempted to set up a democratic government in Iraq, as mentioned earlier. This would promote unity, while the underbelly of the government would be rooted in democracy. Sounds like a great idea, doesn't it? Unfortunately it failed. While the Iraqi people and the United States were grateful for overthrowing the rule that existed, a new problem had presented itself. The issue was establishing a government that represented all sects of Iraqi people. This meant having Sunni representation, Shiite representation, and Kurdish representation.

After the fall of Saddam's regime, the United States set up an occupation structure based on the concerns that immediate sovereignty would favor established Islamist and pro-Iranian factions over pro-western secular parties. (Katzman, 2014) In May of 2003, President Bush named ambassador L. Paul Bremer to head a “Coalition Provisional Authority.” (Katzman, 2014) This was recognized by the United Nations as an occupation authority. (Katzman, 2014)

The first elections process was held on January 30, 2005. (Katzman, 2104) It produced a 275-seat transitional parliament and government that subsequently supervised

writing a new constitution, held a public referendum on a new constitution, and then held elections for a full-term government. (Katzman, 2104) Prime minister Iyad al-Allawi and President Ghazi al-Yawar, a Sunni tribalist, headed the interim government. (Katzman, 2014) On June 28, 2004, Bremer appointed an Iraqi interim government, ending the occupation period. (Katzman, 2014) The TAL also laid out a 2005 elections roadmap, based on agreement among all Iraqi factions that elections should determine future political outcomes. (Katzman, 2104)

The factions included:

Da'wa Party/State of Law Coalition: The largest faction of the Da'wa Party has been led since 2006 by Nuri al-Maliki, who displaced former Da'wa leader (and former Prime Minister) Ibrahim al-Jaafari. (Katzman, 2104) Da'wa was active against Saddam but also operated in some Persian Gulf states, including Kuwait, where they committed attacks against the ruling family during the 1980s. (Katzman, 2104)

Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI): The current leader is Ammar al-Hakim, who succeeded his father Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim upon his death in 2009. (Katzman, 2104) The Hakims descend from the revered late Grand Ayatollah Muhsin Al Hakim, who hosted Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini when he was in exile in Iraq during 1964-1978. (Katzman, 2104) Abd al-Aziz's elder brother, Mohammad Baqr al-Hakim, headed the movement when it was an underground armed opposition group against Saddam, but he was killed outside a Najaf mosque shortly after returning to Iraq following Saddam's overthrow. (Katzman, 2104)

Sadrists and Offshoot Militias: Shiite cleric Moqtada Al Sadr is the son of revered Ayatollah Mohammad Sadiq Al Sadr, who was killed by Saddam's security forces in 1999, and a relative of Mohammad Baqr Al Sadr, a Shiite theoretician and colleague of Ayatollah Khomeini. (Katzman, 2104) Moqtada formed a Shiite militia called the Mahdi Army during the U.S. military presence, which was formally disbanded in 2009 but has regrouped under an alternate name to combat the Islamic State organization. (Katzman, 2104) The Sadrists have competed in all Iraqi elections since 2006. (Katzman, 2104) In 2014, the group competed under the "Al Ahrar" (Liberal) banner. (Katzman, 2104) Runs its own Shiite militia, now called the "Peace Brigades." (Katzman, 2104) Several major Iran-allied Shiite militias are offshoots of Sadr's militia but are no longer closely associated with him. (Katzman, 2104)

Kurdish Factions: Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and Gorran: Masoud Barzani heads the KDP and remains the elected President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), although his term expired in August 2015. (Katzman, 2104) Ailing Jalal Talabani, who was President of Iraq until the 2014 government selection process, led the PUK. (Katzman, 2104) Iraq's current president, Fouad Masoum, is a senior PUK leader as well. (Katzman, 2104) Gorran ("Change") is an offshoot of the PUK and has begun obtaining senior positions in the KRG and Iraqi government. (Katzman, 2104)

Iraqi National Alliance/"Iraqiyya:" Led by Iyad al-Allawi, a longtime anti-Saddam activist who was transitional Prime Minister during June 2004-February 2005. (Katzman,

2104) Allawi is a Shiite Muslim but most of his bloc's supporters are Sunnis, of which many are ex-Baath Party members. (Katzman, 2104) Iraqiyya bloc fractured after the 2010 national election into blocs loyal to Allawi and to various Sunni leaders including ex-COR speaker Osama al-Nujaifi and deputy Prime Minister Saleh al- Mutlaq.

(Katzman, 2104) Allawi and Nujaifi are both vice presidents in the government formed in September 2014, and Mutlaq retained his deputy prime ministerial post. (Katzman, 2104)

Iraqi Islamic Party: Sunni Islamist faction that was underground during Saddam's rule, and members or allies of the faction might have been responsible for the 1996 assassination attempt on Saddam's elder son, Uday. (Katzman, 2104) The party joined post-Saddam politics, and was headed by then Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi.

(Katzman, 2104) The group was part of the Iraqiyya alliance in the 2010 election.

(Katzman, 2104) Hashimi fled a Maliki-ordered arrest warrant in late 2011 and has remained mostly in Turkey since. (Katzman, 2104)

Until the 2003 Iraq War, the regional balance-of-power had always involved Arab powers, as well as Iran. (Wehrey, 2010) After the Iraq War, the fundamental balance shifted to non-Arab states to some degree. (Wehrey, 2010) The conflict and the significant American military presence in an Arab country have also turned the United States into a de facto regional power. (Wehrey, 2010) A consequence of the 2003 invasion was to strengthen Iran's power in the region. The removal of Saddam Hussein upset a traditional balance of power, which resulted in the consequence above. (Wehrey, 2010) From the perspective of Sunni Arab regimes, the 2003 invasion overturned a long-standing paradigm of regional security by removing Iraq as a buffer between a seemingly

expansionist and predatory Iran and its vulnerable neighbors to the west. (Wehrey, 2010) The balance of power in the Middle East tilts towards Iran, even though this was NOT the United States' goal.

2005 proved to be a pivotal year in Iraqi politics. With the drafting of the permanent constitution, many Sunni's were underrepresented. The constitution was adapted on October 15, 2005. It became clear in the provisions that the fifty-five person committee drafted, that the main goal was to establish a distribution of oil and gas revenues to agencies, proportional to regions. (Katzman, 2014) While the constitution stated that Islamic law would be the main source of legislation, discrepancies between factions still remained unsolved. The provisions granted that families had the right to chose which court to attend for issues, and Islamic judges would serve on the Supreme Court, (Katzman, 2014) however not much was said to ensure that each faction would be represented fairly- leading to a slippery slope. The 2005 elections did not resolve the Sunnis' grievances over their diminished positions in the power structure, and subsequent events reinforced their political weakness and sense of resentment. (Katzman, 2014) As a result, bombings between Sunni Militias and Shi'ia factions would begin. The United States plan to instill a democracy and keep peace was rapidly falling apart.

In early 2007, the United States began a “surge” of about 30,000 additional U.S. forces—bringing U.S. troop levels from their 2004-2006 levels of 138,000 to a high of about 170,000—intended to blunt insurgent momentum and take advantage of growing Sunni Arab rejection of Islamist extremist groups. (Katzman, 2014) It was now 2008, and the violence was still going on. The different sects that made up Iraq could not agree on adopting laws and compromises between the ethnic groups. (Katzman. 2014) The key

problem in Iraq had been reaching a compromise between the different ethnic groups. This dated back centuries. As the reconciliation agreements began to deteriorate, the United States started to pull out of Iraq. It became clear that the Iraqi people had a vision of their own. The United States' efforts were determined to be unsuccessful. Staying in Iraq didn't seem logical. By 2012, almost all of the United States forces had left Iraq- in the condition that it was.

The Sunni unrest along with the United States departure provided "political space" for long-standing violent Sunni elements to come forth once more. (Katzman, 2014) The violence grew, with attacks on Shiite structures and villages. Those who opposed American intervention in the region began to fight back.

The insurgent fighters became known as the terrorists' organization ISIS. The United States withdrawal from Iraq did not lead to a vacuum that created Isis, Isis was already brewing. Having the Americans leave served as a catalyst for ISIS to gain territory. Ramadi, Mosul, and Baghdad were just a few of the cities that fell under ISIS control. The sectarian conflicts that blocked the ethnic groups from compromising essentially created the vacuum that allowed ISIS to come to power in the manner that they did.

Rise of ISIS:

The Islamic State (ISIS) is a radical extremist terrorist organization that has posed a significant threat to different religious and ethnic groups since 2003. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, members of the Sunni minority joined ISIS, as it was known in Iraq. Some did so because they felt that it was their duty, while others were young and impressionable. The younger generations were also faced with a shaken sense of identity. Many experienced a threat to their religious/ethnic identity, so they proceeded to join ISIS. ISIS filled that void for many.

The removal of Saddam from power in 2003 by the US-led alliance meant that Sunnis, who had traditionally been Iraqi power-brokers, were deprived of their privileges. (Beranek, 2012) From a broader perspective, the United States invasion has been generally regarded as a significant milestone in Middle Eastern geopolitics. (Beranek, 2012) It has changed the power balance between the Sunni and Shi'ia rival camps in favour of the latter. (Beranek, 2012) In other words, three elements combined to radically alter the situation and bring a resurgence of Shi'ia and the current challenge to Shi'ia-Sunni coexistence: the changing demography of the Middle East, which in recent years largely increased the visibility of Shi'ias in Sunni lands; the impact of the Iranian Islamic Revolution; and Salafi ideology. (Beranek, 2012) The Salafis consider themselves to be chosen Muslims – the saved sect – distinguishing themselves from other Muslims, including their fellow Sunnis. (Beranek, 2012)

Initially, the Arab public praised him, mainly by approval from the media in Iraq. (Wehrey, 2010) The horrific treatment of Sunnis by the Iraqi government (controlled by Shi'ia) led to some active support and much passive support for Zarqawi. However his

tactics proved to be problematic. The tactics and techniques that he developed in Iraq fighting with al-Qaeda spilled over to other fronts that existed and proved to be successful. (Wehrey, 2010) IEDs, female suicide bombings, increased sniper proficiency, and improved indirect fire techniques were all adapted. (Wehrey, 2010) Much of the focus on terrorist spillover from Iraq has focused on Sunni jihadists, but Shi'ia Iraqi insurgents have actually been the most adept at utilizing technological innovations against U.S. and other forces. (Wehrey, 2010)

In Iraq, Abu Musab al Zarqawi headed the organization. (Katzman, 2014) He led the group up until 2006, when United States forces killed him. His ties to AL-Qaeda marked him as an enemy of the United States. Al-Zarqawi became a main target for the United States in the war against terror. By terrorizing and indiscriminately killing Shi'ias, he wanted to trigger a Shi'ia dominant retaliation against the Sunni population and to create a kind of "New Afghanistan" as Jihadi battleground. (Beranek, 2012) Al-Zarqawi also made it clear that al-Qaeda opposed elections in Iraq because they would result in a Shi'ia-dominated government. (Beranek, 2012)

However ISIS differed from AL-Qaeda. Zarqawi and his men conducted raids, took part in beheadings, tortured those who opposed him or backed the United States, and destroyed mosques and other religious structures in the name of Islam. Pursuing this policy, al-Zarqawi was not terrorizing only Shi'ia, but expanded to "moderate" Sunnis who were found guilty of collaboration with the US. (Beranek, 2012) ISIS was far more radical than AL-Qaeda.

International players have failed at adjusting their strategies in order to comprehend the complex nature of the region. (Beranek, 2012) Members of Islamist

groups have felt that American intervention has trampled on core beliefs to an extent. American attempts to prevent al-Qaeda from gaining a safe-heaven in Afghanistan have actually added to the anger of the Islamists. (Beranek, 2012) The Western military forces infringed upon local norms, which only corroborated the Islamist self-legitimization as a power standing up for the protection of Islam, which was the defining norm at the local level. (Beranek, 2012)

The international players were now dealing with a ruthless terrorist organization. The organization would stop at nothing to spread their ideology, gain followers, and proclaim their allegiance to their God. Due to these very aspects, many have suffered.

How far would ISIS go to get their message across? The question didn't seem as daunting until reality struck. ISIS in Iraq invaded cities, killing and capturing hundreds of Iraqi civilians. If one did not accept ISIS and its teachings, he or she was killed instantly. The ideology of the Islamic State spread globally. Members of the terrorists' organization used social media propaganda platform. The wave of propaganda started with the beheadings of several hostages on a beach. Each one, filmed, edited and then uploaded to the website and social media outlets for the world to see. Next, members of ISIS captured, tortured, and murdered a Jordanian pilot. His death was also broadcasted for the world to see. As ISIS gained new territories in Iraq, acquired weapons that were left behind by American forces, and reaped the economic benefits of the black market, their videos grew popular too.

Their influence had become a global phenomenon. From 2014-2016, terrorist's attacks occurred all around the world. On December 15th, 2014 a gunman seized seventeen hostages at the Lindt café in Sydney, Australia. He killed two and wounded

three, and was then killed by police. During this attack, he professed his allegiance to ISIS. (Pearson, 2014) Not even a month later, another attack occurred in Paris. On January 7, 2015 three assailants attacked the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo. In response to a comic of the Prophet Mohammed, the three men killed twelve people. One of the gunmen pledged his allegiance to ISIS a few days after the attack. (Bilefsky and de la Baume, 2015) Two days later, another gunman carried out an attack at a Jewish grocery store in Paris. Nineteen hostages were taken, four of which were killed. This attacker also played a role in the attack at Charlie Hebdo.

Two weeks later, another attack occurred in the Sinai Province of Egypt. This attack consisted of a series of bombings aimed at security forces. Jihadists attacked police headquarters and a military base. Around fifty people were killed. In the same week, gunmen pledging their allegiance to ISIS opened fire in a luxury hotel in Tripoli, Libya. The attack ceased when two of the men detonated a grenade, killing themselves and others. (Fahim, 2015) On March 18, 2015 two gunmen dressed up in military uniforms and attacked a museum in Tunisia. (Botelho, 2015) This attack consisted of the two men firing at tourist buses as they arrived at the museum. They then entered the museum where they fired another round of shots killing a handful more. (Botelho, 2015) ISIS later claimed responsibility for this attack. (Botelho, 2015)

On March 20, 2015, four suicide bombers carried out attacks on Yemen mosques. (Alasmari, Hakim and Hanna, 2015) Shiite rebel forces controlled the mosques. One hundred and thirty-seven people were killed in the suicide bombings. (Alasmari, Hakim and Hanna, 2015)

In Saudi Arabia, a suicide bomber with ties to ISIS targeted another mosque. (Kirkpatrick, 2015) At least twenty-one were killed, and about one hundred and twenty were wounded. This attack occurred on May 22, 2015. (Kirkpatrick, 2015) A political rally in Turkey would be the stage for the next ISIS affiliated attack. On June 5, 2015, a suicide bomber detonated a bomb in the middle of a political rally in Diyarbakir, Turkey. (Ankara, 2015) Over a hundred people were hurt in this attack and two people were killed. (Ankara, 2015)

June 26, 2015 in Tunisia, a gunman opened fire on civilians at a Tunisian beach resort. (Gall and Carlotta, 2015) Over thirty-nine people were killed. (Gall and Carlotta, 2015) A peace rally in Turkey was the next target. On October 10, 2015, suicide bombers set off two explosions just seconds apart. (Letsch, Constanze and Khomami, 2015) Hundreds were killed and wounded. (Letsch, Constanze and Khomami, 2015)

The attacks carried out by those who pledged their allegiance to ISIS were not limited to the Middle East. On October 31, 2015 a Russian airline crashed in the Sinai Peninsula. (Melvin, 2015) The crashed killed everyone on board. Investigators claimed to have found traces of explosives among the wreckage. (Melvin, 2015) ISIS later claimed responsibility. In Garland, Texas, two gunmen opened fire at a cartoon contest, injuring a security guard. (Yan, 2015) Both gunmen were killed. An Islamic radical opened fire on a train that was traveling from Amsterdam to Paris on August 21, 2015. (Chrisafis, 2015) Three people were wounded in this attack. The attacker was stopped by two off-duty U.S. Marines. Unfortunately, this would not be the last attack in Paris.

“**PARIS** -- A series of unprecedented attacks on popular night spots killed at least 120 people in the deadliest violence to strike France since World War II, officials

said. President Francois Hollande condemned it as a terrorist attack and pledged that France would stand firm against its foes. The worst bloodshed was at a concert hall hosting an American rock band, where scores of people were held hostage and attackers hurled explosives at their captives. Police who stormed the building, killing three attackers encountered a bloody scene of horror inside.” (CBS News Article Published November 14, 2015.)

Much like September 11, 2001- a day where everyone remembered where they were or what they were doing when news of a terror attack broke- Parisians and others around the world would experience that very feeling. It was about 5:30 P.M. in the United States on November 13, 2015 when “Breaking News” popped up on the television screen. Reports of an explosion at Stade de France surfaced. (CBS News Article Published November 14, 2015.) Within a matter of minutes, another explosion went off. Next, people heard that there was a shooting outside the restaurant Le Petit Cambodge. (CBS News Article Published November 14, 2015.) Another shooting occurred shortly after that outside Café Bonne Bière. (CBS News Article Published November 14, 2015.) Two gunmen began shooting at the outside terrace of the restaurant La Belle Équipe, where nineteen people were killed. (CBS News Article Published November 14, 2015.) A man detonated a suicide vest in the Comptoir Voltaire Café, where he killed himself and injured about fifteen people. (CBS News Article Published November 14, 2015.)

The attacks on November 13, 2015 did not cease there. Finally, the news broke of a mass shooting at a concert hall. The Bataclan Theatre in Paris, France, was the site of the deadliest attack. (CBS News Article Published November 14, 2015.) The American band Eagles of Death Metal was playing when a group of shooters walked in and opened

fire. At first, many concertgoers thought the sounds they heard of the gun firing was part of the show. They quickly realized that was not the case. Many exited through emergency escapes, hid in bathrooms or offices, or made their way to the roof. Some videos that were broadcasted showed people hanging out of windows in order to escape the shooting. Some people even lay on the floor pretending to be dead, amongst those who were murdered. The gunman took between sixty and one hundred hostages once the police showed up. The siege ended when police shot one of gunman and the other detonated his suicide vest. Eighty-nine people were killed at the Bataclan theatre. (CBS News Article Published November 14, 2015.) One hundred and thirty were killed all together. (CBS News Article Published November 14, 2015.) Hundreds more were wounded, and about half had life threatening injuries. (CBS News Article Published November 14, 2015.) These terrorist attacks would be recognized as the deadliest violence to occur on French soil since World War II. Investigators gathered accounts of the events from witnesses. Many said that their attacker claimed that their actions were revenge on France for what they had done in Syria and Iraq. Each had ties to ISIS.

Another attack shook France on July 14, 2016. (Ellia, Raplh and Almas, 2016) The celebration of Bastille Day in Nice, France turned tragic when a cargo truck drove through crowds of people that lined the streets. Eighty-six people were killed in this attack. (Ellia, Raplh and Almas, 2016) Another four hundred and thirty-four people were wounded. (Ellia, Raplh and Almas, 2016) Police killed the terrorist and ISIS also claimed responsibility. (Ellia, Raplh and Almas, 2016)

March 22, 2016 marked the date of another attack by ISIS. (Alissa, Breeden and Raghavan, 2016) A series of explosions triggered panic at a Brussels airport. (Alissa,

Breeden and Raghavan, 2016) Over two hundred people were injured and over thirty people were killed in this series of attacks. (Alissa, Breeden and Raghavan, 2016) A bomb first went off in the departure lounge of the airport. (Alissa, Breeden and Raghavan, 2016) Following that, another explosion went off at a metro station. One of the attackers also played a role in the Paris attacks. (Alissa, Breeden and Raghavan, 2016) ISIS claimed responsibility for this attack as well.

Two attacks occurred in the United States with ISIS claiming responsibility. On December 2, 2015 a husband and wife traveled to the Inland Regional Center in San Bernadino, California. They began attacking the civilians inside, where they killed fourteen people and injured another seventeen. (Schmidt and Pérez-Peña, 2015) Police chased them for blocks until they stopped the car. (Schmidt and Pérez-Peña, 2015) Both suspects were shot and killed. The wife had pledged allegiance ISIS shortly before the attacks. (Schmidt and Pérez-Peña, 2015) On June 12, 2016 shots broke out at an Orlando nightclub. (Fantz, Karimi and McLaughlin, 2016) The shooter pledged allegiance to ISIS as he expressed his outrage with America for conducting airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. (Fantz, Karimi and McLaughlin, 2016) Forty-nine people were killed in this attack and another fifty-three were injured. (Fantz, Karimi and McLaughlin, 2016) It was the deadliest attack on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001.

Foreign Policy and International Relations:

“Syria has descended into murder on an industrial scale.” CBS News Reporter Scott Pelley on the situation in Aleppo.

In 2013, debate began over whether or not to intervene in Syria. At this point, the influence of the Arab Spring Uprisings had spread throughout Syria. The streets were filled with blood, and chaos. So the answer should have been easy then, right? Of course the United States intervenes- as it the responsibility of a superpower to do so in situations like these. However, the answer did not come that easily. It would not be decided until three years later- when it was practically too late.

The United States had reservations about whether or not to intervene in Syria because of the failures of Iraq. The failures of Iraq, in regards to foreign policy, were still fresh in the minds of United States’ officials. The failure to instill a successful democratic model in Iraq served as a deterrent for the United States. (Nader and Postel, 2013)

Aside from dismantling the rule of Saddam Hussein, the United States also played a key role in the removal of Arab dictator Muammar Gaddafi in Libya under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during the Obama Administration. The response received was minimal, with Arab nations showing little gratitude for the sacrifices the US armed forces made- especially in relation to trying to ease tensions between Saddam Hussein and his rivals. (Smith, 2014) Thousands lost their lives and tens of thousands were wounded, so that Iraqis could vote in free and fair elections and live without fear of being dragged off by Saddam’s security forces. (Smith, 2014) With the failures of the Iraq campaign,

having reservations about intervening in Syria was justified. American opinion favored the hesitation over immediate action. Another key issue at hand dealt with the rebel forces in Syria. Intelligence had gathered information that concluded the majority of the rebel forces fighting against Assad were Al-Qaeda. (Smith, 2014) To aid the opposition, was to aid the group that carried out the attacks of 9/11- it seemed unthinkable. The important thing with Syria was to stay out of the war and to keep America free from the conflict. (Smith, 2014)

A new regional security architecture developed as a result of the security dilemma in the region. By Balancing traditional American partners such as Saudi Arabia and Israel against Iran, sectarian conflicts were slightly alleviated. (Smith, 2014) American interests were still in play as well. The United States had tried to work both sides of this: selling weapons to Saudi Arabia, but signing a deal with Iran that angered Israel and Saudi Arabia. President Obama described this structure as a “geopolitical equilibrium . . . ‘developing between Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran in which there’s competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare,’” in an Article written in The New Yorker in 2014. (Smith, 2014) He noted that “competition and even conflicts will still exist in the region, he continued, but it’s contained and it is expressed in ways that don’t exact such an enormous toll on the countries involved.” (Smith, 2014) Some of his cabinet members on the other hand, favored American intervention. (Smith, 2014)

President Obama’s red line- the line that Assad would have to cross in order for the United States to intervene- was the use of chemical weapons on civilians. (Smith, 2014) On August 21, 2013, The Assad regime had conducted a chemical attack on rebel

occupied Damascus. U.S. intelligence had gathered information regarding the attack from Syrian doctors, journalists, eyewitness accounts, and social media outlets. The explosives contained traces of a nerve agent British and American intelligence reports would later conclude.

“Three hospitals in the Damascus area received approximately 3,600 patients displaying symptoms consistent with nerve agent exposure in less than three hours on the morning of August 21, according to a highly credible international humanitarian organization. The reported symptoms such as and the epidemiological pattern of events were characterized by the massive influx of patients in a short period of time, the origin of the patients, and the contamination of medical and first aid workers – were consistent with mass exposure to a nerve agent.” (Warrick via The White House, 2013.)

Videos of the attack obtained by intelligence officials showed symptoms of the nerve gas agent. The symptoms reported included unconsciousness, foaming from the nose and mouth, constricted pupils, rapid heartbeat, and difficulty breathing. (Warrick, 2013) Other accounts of the attack exhibited fatalities, but there were no visible injuries. (Warrick, 2013)

According to the intelligence report, chemical weapons were considered “key tools in the Syrian arsenal.” (Warrick, 2013)

“The Syrian regime has used chemical weapons over the last year primarily to gain the upper hand or break a stalemate in areas where it had struggled to seize and hold strategically valuable territory. We assess that the regime’s frustration with its inability to secure large portions of Damascus may have contributed to its

decision to use chemical weapons on Aug. 21.” (Warrick, 2013)

In the days leading up to the August 21st attack, Syrian chemical weapons personnel were conducting experiments in the Damascus suburb of ‘Adra. (Warrick, 2013) These experiments included chemical weapons such as sarin gas and mustard gas. The report also concluded that the Syrian regime had the capability to carry out an attack such as the one on August 21st. Their arsenal was also comprised of munitions that could strike simultaneously in multiple locations. (Warrick, 2013) The red line had now been crossed- what was next?

President Obama and other foreign nations did nothing at first. Reports of the nerve agent attack circled the media. The United States claimed to have been in a predicament- as Syria and Iran were allies- intervening in Syria could result in a dissipating relationship with Iran. So the rebels, also known as the Free Syrian Army fought against the regime by any means necessary. As the death toll of the Syrian civilians rose- international organizations began to send aid. Where were the United States and other key international players?

As September rolled around, officials in the Central Intelligence Agency started to send weapons to Syrian rebels. The aid included firearms; nonlethal gear, vehicles, communications equipment and advance combat medical kits. (Londoño & Miller, 2013) The arrival of the aid took longer than expected because American intelligence faced a dilemma. Initially, artillery was supposed to be sent to the rebels in June. (Londoño & Miller, 2013) However, some officials feared the increased weapons meant for the rebels, would end up in the hand of the Islamic State. (Londoño & Miller, 2013) As the shipments arrived, tensions were growing between Assad and President Obama. President

Obama threatened to order missile strikes against the regime as a response to the first attack back in August. The initiatives taken by the Obama Administration provided hope after years of inaction. (Londoño & Miller, 2013)

Russian Offensive in Syria:

“The regime, backed by Russian air power, has decimated much of eastern Aleppo with aerial bombardments in recent months, and analysts have said the intensified air raids are a sign the regime may be planning a ground offensive to wrest control of the area. A government siege on eastern Aleppo since July has essentially cut the area off from the rest of the world -- a stranglehold tactic that the Syrian regime is infamous for. (Arif, Dewan, Khadder & Visser, 2016)

Fast Forward three years later-2016 and the war in Syria is still going on. President Bashar al-Assad has continued to murder his own people. The President has claimed that he is fighting terrorists- the Islamic State and even members of Al-Qaeda. On an international scale, fighting against terror groups seems like the logical thing to do- and many have agreed. The issue is that while Assad has claimed that he is combating ISIS, he had attacked his own people. According to an article in *The New York Times*, “the Syrian government has tended to call all its opponents terrorists, and Russia makes little distinction among the different groups fighting Mr. Assad.” (Barnard & Nechepurenko, 2016)

Airstrikes in Syria have become a common occurrence. Assad has dropped barrel

bomb after barrel bomb on rebel-held territories, killing thousands. Another issue for the rebels is Russia. The Russian President Vladimir Putin has aided Assad in airstrikes. He has carried out strikes on the same besieged cities as Assad. And while Putin claims to be fighting against terrorist groups too- it has become clear that these strikes are killing innocent civilians. Strikes have occurred hourly. Targets have included mosques, buildings, and hospitals.

The Russian offensive had kept its promises to Assad. The relationship between Putin and Assad has grown stronger with each air strike and target hit. The new alliance has also posed a threat to the relationship with the United States. What business did Russia have intervening in Syria? Two arguments have been made in regards to this action. The first argument is that Assad asked Putin for help directly. By aiding Assad, Russia exhibited a sense of strength to other nations. Putin's action has also been considered a dig at the U.S. When the United States didn't act after Assad crossed the red line, some have claimed it was a show of weakness. Putin has exhibited the opposite.

In November of 2016, Assad and Russia stopped the airstrikes for a 24-hour period. This was to "allow" those who were in Aleppo to leave as the regime closed in on the city. Assad had regained control due to the help from the Russian offensive. At the same time, President-elect Donald Trump has shown support for a possible alliance with Syria and Russia. This sense of support showed a shift in international relations. Could Trump, Putin, and Assad come together to combat ISIS? Wouldn't they also kill innocent civilians in the process? Doesn't that act go against NATO and wouldn't it be considered a war crime? What about relations with other countries such as Britain, France, Germany, and Israel? Proposed questions such as these made it difficult to establish a general

support for Syria and Russia. However with Donald Trump being sworn in as the new President in January, anything seemed possible.

Conclusion:

“The costs of rebellions are always easy to see: the disruption of routine, the lost lives and property, the debris of sudden upheaval.” (Ajami, 2012)

This civil war has been going on for five years and it has been deemed one of the worst civil wars in world history. Conditions in Syria have been the topic of international discussions for half a decade now, with no resolution in sight.

Amidst the violence and chaos, ISIS fighters made their way to Syria. It was here that they were able to gain even more control, and expand their following. Like Iraq, those who felt lost or who felt that they could not identify with the regime, joined ISIS. Those who thought opposition forces were better also found themselves among Islamic fighters. The Islamic State added to the atrocities that were already being committed in Syria. This left many with no choice but to flee.

The influence of ISIS in Syria, along with Assad’s forces led to a migration crisis. It became known as the Syrian Refugee Crisis. Millions of Syrians left their homes in order to seek a safe haven. ISIS ravaged through their villages, killing anyone who did not pledge allegiance to them. For many, this nightmare was just beginning.

There were camps that were set up along the borders of Jordan and Turkey, but they could only provide minimal support. The refugee camps filled rather quickly, leaving thousands stranded with no place to go. Thousands decided to cross the Aegean Sea, with hopes to make it to Greece. From there they would make their way to Western Europe. This was not easy by any means. Cooperation among the European countries did not go smoothly either. With the terrorist's attacks going on across the world at the hands of ISIS, many countries closed their borders at one point or another. This left many stranded. The civil war became a humanitarian crisis as well as an international political crisis.

The oppressive nature of the Ba'th regime and President Bashar al-Assad took a toll on the Syrian people- forcing them into a corner. Had they not spoken out, many would have continued to face scrutiny and religious oppression. Unfortunately, Syrians did not take into account the power of Assad and his regime. The political spheres within Syria and Iraq were bound to fail. It can be concluded that the religious and ethnic rivalries aided to the demise of Syria as well. There was no cooperation on either side of the spectrum-only war and violence.

The "vacuum" that formed as a result of the United States leaving Iraq is a mere simplification of what actually occurred. We have learned that the Middle East has been plagued with turmoil for centuries. The question of whether or not the United States should have been in Iraq remains an open question. On the one hand, there are those who believed it was the right thing to do- given the information that had been gathered at the time. Dick Cheney who was the Vice President and Defense Donald Rumsfeld who was the Secretary of Defense at the time still believe the invasion was necessary. The claim

that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction was a serious threat to national security. As the United States completed the task of overthrowing Saddam Hussein, new issues in regard to government arose. Although completely fragile, the Iraqi people were no longer living under Saddam Hussein and many saw that as a victory. On the other hand, there are those who have argued that the United States should have never entered Iraq in 2003. The information collected claiming Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction has been deemed false. The models of government that the United States had attempted to implement failed. Tensions between the United States and Iraq were still present.

Was the United States foolish to think that a democratic government could be successfully transplanted in a country like Iraq? In a way yes-the goals that needed to be achieved were local ones: create a caliphate or institute Islamic law that included all sects, rather than transplanting a democracy in a country that had been oppressed for hundreds of years.

Epilogue:

Thousands have attempted to leave Syria. Sadly, many of whom were killed in the process. Assad's army has gotten stronger on the ground as a result of the Russian backed strikes. Thousands of civilians- men, women, and children have lost their lives. Those who stayed in Aleppo did so because they had no choice. A good portion of the population that remained were too sick to flee. Bombs have hit residential buildings and hospitals- killing the already wounded. Although ceasefires have been enacted, Assad's forces have not complied.

It is estimated that 400,000+ innocent lives were lost- and it does not look like it will stop there. It has been a devastating time for the Syrian people. Many children are now orphans. Most survivors have lost their entire families.

On April 4th, 2017, the Assad Regime released bombs over a part of Northern Syria that was occupied by rebels. The bombs contained sarin gas, a nerve agent that wreaks havoc on the body. Images of men, women, and children suffocating, foaming at mouth, turning blue, and laying paralyzed filled media outlets around the world. Assad has used a banned chemical weapon on his own people yet again.

This attack followed one back in August of 2013. After that one, he claimed to have gotten rid of chemical weapons. Western countries have accused the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad of carrying out the chemical attack on the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib Province. It has been concluded that this attack was the worst in the history of the six-year war. Mr. Assad's government signed that treaty less than four years ago, agreeing to give up his chemical arsenal after the first major chemical weapons attack in Syria. The attack occurred neared Damascus, killing hundreds. Countries such as France, Britain and the United States have proposed a draft resolution at the United Nations Security Council, to put an end to these attacks according to reports.

As the images circulated among news and media outlets, President Trump ordered a missile strike on an aircraft base in Syria. Fifty-nine tomahawk missiles were fired from U.S. naval carriers in the Mediterranean. The strategic strike was meant to weaken Assad's arsenal. The strike was a response to the chemical weapons attack that occurred just a few days earlier. President Trump exhibited a sense of strength- his purpose was to relay the message that no chemical warfare would be tolerated. This was a crucial change

from the Obama Administration. Yet Trump's actions have posed a threat to relations with Saudi Arabia, Russia and Iran.

There is no other way to describe what has occurred in Aleppo and the cities of Syria other than calling it a mass homicide. The events that have taken place over the past five years parallel atrocities that have occurred in the past. Assad continues to destroy Syria with his 'hitlertarian' disregard for life. Syria is a country in ruins, with no end to this war in sight.

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