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## Role and Impact of ISIS in Syrian Civil War

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the rise, evolution, and impact of the Islamic State (ISIS) within the context of the Syrian Civil War. Emerging from the chaos following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, ISIS capitalized on instability, sectarian divisions, and weak state structures in both Iraq and Syria to establish a self-proclaimed caliphate. The group employed brutal tactics, controlled key territories like Raqqa, and financed operations through oil smuggling and extortion. Its ideological narrative and use of media allowed it to recruit globally and spread fear. ISIS deeply affected the Syrian conflict, creating divisions among opposition groups and prompting shifting alliances. Major powers such as Iran, Turkey, and Russia responded with varying strategies based on their regional interests. Though militarily defeated by 2017, ISIS legacy persists through fragmented governance, continued insurgent activities, and prolonged geopolitical tension. The paper applies realist theory to explain the motivations of state actors involved in the Syrian war.

**Keywords:** ISIS, Syrian Civil War, Caliphate, Terrorism, Foreign Intervention

### Introduction

ISIS fell into instability following the 2003 Arab Spring and the US-led invasion of Iraq. The article highlights the need to work with Muslim teachers to effectively counter the insurgency and highlights the ongoing challenges posed by the Islamic State's continued ambitions despite its loss of territory.

The Syrian civil war began in 2011 when the government began to violently attack opposition groups against democratic reforms. The main role in the war is played by the government of Bashar al-Assad, which is supported by Russia and Iran. Opposition groups, including independent militias, Islamist groups and Kurdish groups, are fighting and dividing within the

country. The Kurdish group is trying to establish its own autonomous region to combat the government of Bashar al-Assad and the Islamists. Russia and Iran support Bashar al-Assad around the world, while Western countries such as the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia also support the opposition. Terrorist groups such as Islamic State have also played a role in the war, particularly in eastern and northern Syria, where they control large areas. Civil wars are complex, involving internal and external events that have led to the deaths and displacement of millions of people (Clancy, Theory of an emerging state actor: The Islamic state of Iraq and Syria, 2018).

## **Background of ISIS**

The birth of the Islamic State (ISIS) is the result of a long and difficult project launched by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its affiliates in Iraq. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraqi politics and society were thrown into chaos, giving extremist groups an opportunity to take advantage. Led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, AQI took advantage of the crisis to establish bases in Iraq. However, Zarqawi was killed by the US military in 2006, but AQI still exists.

Senior AQI leader Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi became the group's leader in 2010. Baghdadi gave Al Qaeda a new direction, preparing it to pursue more radical and broader goals. Under Baghdadi, Al Qaeda evolved into the Islamic State (ISIS) and began operating in Syria in 2013. The Islamic State controls large areas of Iraq and Syria, and its attacks and violence have instilled fear and hatred around the world. As a result of his intervention, there has been severe torture, human rights violations and violence against non-Muslims in the region. The Islamic State has also tried to develop its ideological narrative and become the new leader of the global jihad movement. The Islamic State is recruiting people from all over the world and has become a global terrorist organization. However, the international organization has increased its efforts against the Islamic State and by 2017, most of the areas it controlled were returned. However, the power of the "Islamic State" has not yet been fully achieved. Even after Baghdadi's death, the organization continued to grow in many areas and its network expanded worldwide. Although the rise of the "Islamic State" has opened a new page in the world's fight against terrorism and terrorism, terrorism and terrorism are still a major security problem of the modern world (Ibrahim, 2014).

The group began to increase its presence in Syria after the US invasion of Iraq led to violence. After the 2003 Iraq War, Iraq's security system weakened and a wave of violent attacks gave extremist groups the opportunity to exploit it. Taking advantage of this volatile situation, many jihadist groups, including the Islamic State, began to build strongholds in the Iraqi border region and expand their influence into Syria. The conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims intensified after the US invasion of Iraq and its expansion into Syria. At the same time, the Islamic State became a powerful force and

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consolidated its presence in Syria. The group is trying to use the conflict and political instability in Iraq and Syria to establish a caliphate in both countries (Ciftci, 2017).

### **Role of ISIS in Syrian Civil War**

In 2011, the Syrian government weakened and state institutions collapsed. The Islamic State took advantage of the war in Syria to enter the country. At the same time, the war in Syria allowed the Islamic State to expand its activities. The absence of government forces throughout Syria and the ongoing war with the rebels gave the Islamic State the opportunity to emerge as a new and powerful organization. ISIS sent troops and began occupying areas where the government was losing power. It aims to establish a caliphate in Syria and spread its ideas and goals by taking advantage of all the benefits of the current situation (Cordesman, 2022).

The Islamic State has seized territory in Syria and Iraq through military operations, regional pressure, and strategic exploitation of local discontent. The group has engaged in separatism in Iraq, where the government led by Nouri al-Maliki has isolated Sunnis and created an environment conducive to insurgency. The crisis in Syria's civil war continues to loom large, as the country's collapse has allowed several terrorist groups, including the Islamic State, to control large areas of the country. They have used tactics such as car bombs and assassinations to attack and occupy major cities, seize key infrastructure such as oil and border ports, and exploit weaknesses in the Iraqi army and Syrian government. The group's fighters, many of whom are former professional soldiers, are disciplined and effective, using modern weapons to quickly defeat local militias. After the Islamic State captured Raqqa in 2013, the city became the Islamic State's capital and represented the group's goals in the region. Its location is particularly important because it is located in northern Syria and allows ISIS to control significant assets and resources. Raqqa became the center of the Islamic State's self-declared caliphate, which allowed them to gain power, mobilize people, and establish their own government (Clancy, *The dynamics of ISIS: an emerging state actor*, 2016). Once in control, they resort to violence and impose sharia law in the areas they control. They rule through violence and fear, using executions, beheadings, and crucifixions as tools to enforce their rule. The organization takes a tough stance, imposing harsh punishments for crimes such as theft, adultery, or blasphemy. Women face strict dress codes and gender discrimination, while ethnic minorities face persecution, forced conversion, or expulsion from areas they control. Economically, the Islamic State has managed to become self-sufficient by using local resources. The Islamic State seizes, extracts, and smuggles oil to finance its activities and support the country's development.

The Islamic State also extorts money from local populations through tax collection, theft, and control of agriculture. Money has allowed the group to maintain its authority, expand its sphere of influence, and consolidate its power in Iraq and Syria. Dawa plays a key role in the organization's strategy. The Islamic State uses social media and mass media to spread its message around the world, presenting itself as a defender of pure Islam and a caliphate that unites Muslims around the world. These narratives have helped it rally people around the world, grow its power, and expand its influence. These attacks have allowed the Islamic State to take over vast areas and establish a brutal and oppressive state. But over time, a joint U.S.-coalition military campaign by local forces pushed back ISIS, gained territory and eventually brought the weak group under control in the region (Steed, 2016).

ISIS is not only strengthening the Syrian civil war by challenging the Assad regime and the rebels, but its ideology also influences local and international actors, causing disruptions, many conflicts, and continues to have an impact today (Couzigou, 2016).

## **International Reaction**

Iran, Turkey, and Russia have played critical roles in responding to ISIS, each with distinct strategies shaped by their geopolitical interests and regional influence. As a major regional power with significant Shiite influence, Iran was particularly concerned about the rise of ISIS, which adheres to an extreme form of Sunni Islam that threatened Iranian ideological and strategic interests (Frantzman, 2017).

### **Iran**

Iran responded directly by providing military and logistical support to the governments of Iraq and Syria, which were at risk of falling to ISIS. This support included the deployment of Iranian military advisors, financial support, and, most importantly, the mobilization of Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria. Iran also coordinated with Russia to support the Syrian regime, which was besieged by ISIS and opposition forces. Iran framed these actions within a broader struggle to preserve the Shiite axis of influence and prevent the spread of Sunni extremism in the region (Ryan, 2015).

### **Turkey**

Turkey approach to ISIS was more complex, balancing its opposition to ISIS with other strategic goals, including the Kurdish issue. Initially, Turkey was criticized for allowing ISIS fighters to cross its borders into Syria and Iraq, though it later became more active in combating the group. Turkey response included direct military operations and support for local Syrian opposition

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groups, many of which were backed by Ankara. These efforts were aimed not only at countering ISIS but also at curbing the growing influence of Kurdish militias in Syria, which Turkey considered affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a separatist group it considers a terrorist organization. As part of its broader efforts, Turkey played a significant role in the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS, but it also operated independently in northern Syria, carrying out airstrikes to create a buffer zone against ISIS and Kurdish forces.

### **Russia**

Russia involvement in the fight against ISIS largely focused on supporting the Assad regime in Syria, which was fighting not only ISIS but also various rebel factions. Russia intervention in 2015, through airstrikes and military support, marked a turning point in the Syrian civil war, dramatically shifting the balance of power in Assad favor. While Russia primary goal has been to preserve the Syrian regime as an ally and prevent its collapse, it has also worked to counter the Islamic State, which has posed a threat to Russian interests in the region. In addition to direct military action, Russia has provided support to Syrian and Iraqi forces in the fight against the Islamic State, sometimes in coordination with Iran. But Russia's core objectives will vary depending on its broader regional goals, including controlling power in Syria and countering Western influence in the region. The way these regional powers respond to ISIS aligns with their own national interests, creating a complex web of justice and conflict that has led to widespread unrest in the Middle East. Each country is not only acting against ISIS, but also, depending on the situation, joining or opposing other actors in the region to advance its economic goals.

### **Impact of ISIS on Syrian Civil War**

The rise of ISIS has had a major impact on the Syrian civil war, leading to alliance restructuring and internal divisions. As ISIS expands across Syria and Iraq, it poses an unprecedented threat to many groups, causing many groups to reassess their priorities and form new alliances. One of the most significant changes is the alliance between the US and Kurdish forces, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which includes Kurdish fighters (Khatib, 2018). Concerned about the growing threat posed by the Islamic State, the US has begun providing extensive military assistance to the Kurds in exchange for their efforts to defeat the Islamic State. The cooperation is particularly important in northern Syria, where Kurdish forces have played a key role in the fight against the Islamic State, despite historical tensions between the Kurds and US-NATO ally Turkey. At the same time, the presence of ISIS has

also intensified divisions within the broader opposition factions. Rebel groups that had primarily fought against the Syrian government now had to contend with the threat of ISIS. Some groups, particularly Islamist factions, saw ISIS as a natural ally or shared ideologies, while others saw it as a dangerous and radical force that undermined their goals. These differences have divided the opposition, with some groups allying themselves with external powers such as the United States, Turkey, and others, while others have sought to maintain autonomy or even cooperate with the Assad regime in fighting ISIS. This division among rebel factions has left the Syrian opposition more fragmented and less united, weakening its ability to challenge the Assad regime. At the same time, the rise of the Islamic State and the violence it has caused have been both hindered and supported by the conflict between Assad's forces and the opposition. Both the government and various rebel groups have found themselves in a larger fight against ISIS, leading to competing, shifting alliances and more conflict. Defeating ISIS is just one of many fronts. In this volatile environment, as the rivalry and incompetence of religious opponents has deepened, alliances that once seemed unthinkable, such as the collaboration of US and Kurdish forces, have become indispensable in the ongoing fight against the enemy (Ianchovichina, 2015).

### **Long Term Affects of ISIS**

The Islamic mission in Syria has played a significant role in creating internal and regional conflicts in the Middle East. Initially, the "Islamic State" took advantage of the crisis created by the Syrian war to expand its territory in 2014, declaring that it had established a "caliphate" and controlled a large area in Syria and Iraq. This is a significant moment because it not only affects the weakness of the Syrian state, but also complicates the civil war. The group is seen to be involved in the struggle for control of Syria, as many groups, including Syrian government forces, Kurdish forces, opposition groups and countries with different strengths, have changed their strategies to combat ISIS or take advantage of its spread. For the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, ISIS has become an easy excuse to consolidate its power and receive military aid from Russia and Iran (Terrill, 2014). While Assad forces were directly engaged in fighting opposition groups, ISIS presence in Syria allowed the regime to present itself as the primary force in the fight against terrorism and gain international support. For the Kurdish forces, ISIS represented both a threat and an opportunity. The Syrian Democratic Forces, primarily composed of Kurdish fighters, found themselves on the front lines of the fight against ISIS, receiving significant support from the United States and its allies. This not only helped curb ISIS regional ambitions, but also positioned the Kurds as major players in the region, with long-term consequences for control of northeastern Syria. However, the rise of ISIS also intensified Turkey concerns about Kurdish autonomy, exacerbating regional tensions.

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On the world stage, the presence and brutality of the Islamic State, especially its attacks and propaganda campaigns in Europe, are drawing more foreign powers into the Syrian conflict (J.Seijbel, 2017). The US-led coalition against ISIS has become a major force in the fight not only against Western powers but also against regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran; its methods are profitable to follow in the Middle East. The fight against ISIS has also fueled military operations and coalitions that continue to influence parts of the region. After the decisive defeat of the Islamic State, the group's legacy in Syria is a fragmented and weak state with many forces still in place. Syria is a geographic and political conflict, with areas controlled by different actors (the Assad regime, Kurdish forces, pro-Turkish groups and opposition groups), making political integration difficult. The post-war landscape remains unstable, with ISIS remnants still engaged in insurgent activities, while the broader geopolitical competition for influence in Syria continues, particularly between Russia, Iran, and Western powers (Awan, 2024).

Movements driven by national interests and civil war are seen as real revolutions. When we look at international relations, reality is important. We can look at the Syrian war from a realistic perspective. Foreign countries intervened in the Syrian war to protect their own interests and interests. US intervention in the Syrian conflict is to overthrow the Assad regime and seize oil reserves. Syria's mineral resources consist mainly of oil, but some areas are still located in the United States and oil is extracted from there. Iran is a country that intervenes in the Syrian war for its own interests abroad and supports the Assad regime. Iran and its allies are joining the war against Saudi Arabia and Israel in Syria. Thus, Saudi Arabia stepped in to protect its own interests and compete with Iran. and we support groups against Assad. Likewise, other countries have entered this field to protect their own interests. President Assad began to control the security apparatus. However, over time, Assad's control weakened. The support of anti-Assad groups is quite high (Walt, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

The rise and fall of ISIS has significantly impacted the Syrian civil war and the broader Middle East. Initially capitalizing on the chaos of the region, ISIS quickly expanded across Syria and Iraq, establishing a brutal caliphate and instilling fear globally. Its violent governance and extremist ideology disrupted local and international politics, drawing in major regional powers like Iran, Turkey, and Russia, each pursuing their own strategic interests. The U.S.-led coalition's eventual military efforts led to the group's territorial losses, but its legacy remains, with ongoing instability in Syria, fractured alliances, and the persistent threat posed by ISIS remnants. The long-term effects include a

fragmented Syria, continued geopolitical struggles, and a complex regional order shaped by ISIS's rise and the international responses to its brutal reign. The fight against ISIS reshaped alliances, solidified the Kurdish position in northern Syria, and deepened the involvement of global powers in the Middle East, leaving an indelible mark on the region's future.

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