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**EXPLOITING THE GAPS –
THE RISE OF ISIS AS A REGIONAL POWER**

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**EXPLOITING THE GAPS –
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The The occupation and control of the Iraqi city of Mosul and Syrian city of Raqqa by

the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was an impressive display of power-projection by a

non-state organization. The rise of ISIS to be able to achieve this level of success was the result

of several factors: from long conflict between different sects of Islam, to approaches of ruling

political groups; and, the unintended consequences of intervention in the Middle East by Western

nations and other regional powers. The removal of all facets of Ba'ath party rule following the

2003 invasion of Iraq and the installation into power of the previously disenfranchised Shi'a

majority fostered an environment of retribution, marginalizing the Sunni population and

subjected them to abuses by the Iraqi government. This marginalization created discontent

amongst the Sunni, who subsequently supported al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in their conduct of an

insurgency. Additionally, slow rebuilding of the country during the US occupation of Iraq,

combined with continued violence and strife resulting from the AQI insurgency, forced some

two million Iraqis into neighbouring countries, including Syria, where Sunnis continued to be

marginalized; and, made scapegoats for ongoing violent oppression perpetrated by the Assad

government.

As a result of continued marginalization of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, ISIS exploited a

power vacuum and expanded their base of support and power. This dynamic compelled Western

nations and Iran to support the Iraqi government; and, resulted in a complex situation in Syria

where competing interests of the US and its allies, Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and Turkey attempted

to further their own agendas. The expansion of power, combined with their miscalculations of

opposition from several nations, limited resources, and opposition to atrocities committed by ISIS forces, resulted in their containment and diminishment of power and influence.

Historic Sunni-Shi'a conflict is a major factor in the rise of ISIS. Emerging from and existing for centuries following the death of Mohammad, the conflict has been conducted across a spectrum of conflict, from acts of terrorism to inter-state conflict such as the Iran-Iraq war, where one of Iraq's goals was to contain increasing power of the Shi'a sect following the Iran Revolution[1]. In the 35 years leading up to the US invasion of Iraq, the Ba'ath party, comprised mostly of the Sunni minority, ruled Iraq, where the demographics are divided amongst Sunni at about 20 percent, Shi'a at approximately 60-65 percent, and ethnic Kurds (mostly Sunni, with Shi'a and other sects) at 15-20 percent[2]. Prior to the invasion, the Iraqi government suppressed, with varying success, Shi'a and Kurds through the application of state power; and, also suppressed non-state delivered sectarian violence. Under this regime in 1999, Sunni sectarianism found a home in the Jama'at Tawhid Wal Jihad (the Group of Unity and Jihad) or JTW, led by Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi. This organization, sought to enforce a strict interpretation of Islam in Iraq, an opportunity which would be presented with fervor with the insurgency against the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

JTW provided was the face for those who wished to resist the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Additionally, the displacement of the Sunni ruling class from power, as a result of de-Ba'athification, appealed to those Sunni who were now disenfranchised. The US-led occupation failed to institute an inclusive process for developing a post-invasion Iraq government.

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[1] Max L. Gross, "Shi'a Muslims and Security: The Centrality of Iran." In *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Security,* edited by Chris Seiple, Dennis R. Hoover, and Pauletta Otis. (New York: Routledge), 2013, 66.

[2] Abdul Basir Yosufi, "The Rise and Consolidation of Islamic State: External Intervention and Sectarian Conflict." *Connections : The Quarterly Journal* 15, no. 4 (Fall, 2016), 92.

Alternately, a process of de-Ba'athification was instituted, with a goal of wiping clean the remnants of Ba'ath party rule under Saddam Hussein. This policy ensured that sectarianism and ethnicism would re-emerge to play a major role in Iraq and the region[3]. Ba'ath party officials were removed from their positions and barred from future government employment; and, they were removed from key positions within ministries, universities, and hospitals[4]. Additionally, the military and other key security organizations were dissolved[5]. This policy was instituted without consideration for why Iraqis had joined, in that a requirement to attain senior positions in government, education, and military organizations, required party membership. As Sunni comprised the bulk of membership, these key community and institutional personnel were left without prospect for future employment and careers[6]. The government was then reconstituted primarily from the previously disenfranchised Shi'a community, which failed to adequately represent Iraq's various communities, and was unable to deliver economic and security stability[7], adding to dissatisfaction with the post-invasion environment. Sunni extremists were thus drawn to JTW.

Al-Zarqawi saw an opportunity for JTW to increase destabilization. The Sunni-led insurgency quickly gained momentum with major vehicle borne improvised explosive devices in Baghdad in 2003. As it gained momentum, it transformed to "large scale insurgency in September 2004, when zl-Zarqawi officially pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and the organization became known as AQI[8]." As the insurgency grew, it sought to weaken the government through

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[3] Gareth Stansfield, "Explaining the Aims, Rise, and Impact of the Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham." *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 1 (Winter, 2016), 146.
[4] Yosufi, 96.
[5] *Ibid*, 97.
[6] *Ibid*, 96.
[7] Dylan O'Driscoll, "Liberating Mosul: Beyond the Battle." *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 4 (Winter2016 2016), 62.
[8] Tomáš Kaválek, "From al-Qaeda in Iraq to Islamic State: The Story of Insurgency in Iraq and Syria in 2003-2015." *Alternatives: Turkish Journal Of International Relations* 14, no. 1 (Spring2015 2015), 5-6

the conduct of sectarian violence, encouraging affected Sunnis to join AQI[9]. At this time, the US

was unwilling to assign the resources necessary to maintain security, and subsequently, could not

protect the population and gain support in fighting the insurgency. This included an

unwillingness to confront Shi'a militias or apply pressure on the Iraqi government to reign in the

reprisals against Sunnis[10]. Exasperating the issue, AQI sought to create additional instability by

beheading of Westerners and releasing photos and videos of the acts, as with the civilian

mechanic Nick Berg[11]. Conversely, as the insurgency grew, and Iraq under the rule of pro-

Iranian Shi'ite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who gained power in May of 2006, Shi'ite

militias increased their attack on Sunnis[12]. This culminated in the fall of 2006, following the

death of al-Zarqawi, when AQI became Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

As ISI gained or sought to gain territory, they utilized intelligence information carried

over from the Ba'athist party days, seeking out persons who could oppose them or may be loyal

to Baghdad[13]. These persons were often murdered as a way to remove opposition and to strike

fear into the populace they wished to rule, including moderate Sunnis[14]. Additionally, ISI had

also achieved a position of financial power, with an income of approximately 200 million US

dollars per year, gained primarily from black market, racketeering, kidnapping, and oil

smuggling[15]. The growing strength through criminal activity and brutal action had its downside.

"Its radicalism and ferocious aggressive criminal networks tempering with local Sunni tribes,

gray and black market enterprises all brought tribes against them[16]." As a result, opposition from

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[9] Ross Harrison, "Towards a Regional Strategy Contra ISIS." *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (Autumn, 2014), 4.
[10] Yosufi, 98.
[11] Kaválek, 9.
[12] Michael Crowley, "Iraq's Eternal War. (Cover story)." *Time* 183, no. 25 (June 30, 2014), 32.
[13] Kaválek, 19.
[14] W.A. Terrill, "Understanding the Strengths and Vulnerabilities of ISIS." *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (Autumn, 2014), 56
[15] Kaválek, 12.
[16] *Ibid*, 12.

Iraqi government and civilians, and the US-led coalition, achieved sufficient strength to begin an effective anti-insurgency campaign. ISI discovered that "pure violence of insurgents against civilians is an inefficient tool to control population[17]"; although, as with de-Ba'athification, the US and the Iraqi government would find that success against ISI would have both intended and unintended consequences.

By the end of 2006, the US and Iraq were implementing new anti-insurgency measures. These were combined with groups of a new movement called the Awakening, or Sahwa, primarily in Sunni areas. These Sahwa groups were intended to fight the insurgency, and achieved a great deal of success[18]. The US and Iraq took advantage of an increasing dislike by Sunni tribes toward the brutal tactics employed by ISI[19]. By 2009, the US troop surge and the anti-insurgency measures with Sahwa severely damaged ISI, and by 2011, the insurgency had returned to a small scale, territory was regained, and ISI fighters mostly dispersed. As with the ancient proverb "the enemy's of my enemy is my friend", the US forces and Iraqi government found themselves cooperating with potentially undesirable allies. Sunnis who had been previously under ISI rule were organized, and severing ties and relationships following the marginalization of ISI could result in them turning on their former US and Iraqi allies[20]. In their containment by anti-insurgency measures, ISI fighters managed to save the organization from entire defeat by fleeing to Syria. With the ongoing Syrian civil war, ISI fighters were able to cross the border, and subsequently reconstituted itself[21]. It is at this point that the unintended consequences of the anti-insurgency measures began to take shape, and ISI emerged as ISIS.

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[17] Kaválek, 3.
[18] Terrill, 15.
[19] Kaválek, 11.
[20] Colin H. Kahl, Brian Katulis, and Marc Lynch. "Thinking Strategically about Iraq: Report from a Symposium." *Middle East Policy* 15, no. 1 (Spring, 2008), 87.
[21] Terrill, 15.

With the weak of the Iraqi government and support for the US, the Kurdish areas were able to secure autonomy[22]. This created concern not only amongst the Iraq government, but also in Iran, Turkey, and Syria, who see Kurdish independence as a threat to their territorial integrity. This encouraged greater involvement in Iraq by Iran[23]. During the anti-insurgency measures and Sahwa, al-Maliki retained his position in the 2010 election. With ISI contained, and following the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in December 2011, al-Maliki , renewed the suppression of Sunni political activities, arrested provincial leaders in Sunni areas, and met any demonstrations or resistance with increasing violence by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)[24]. At this juncture, al-Maliki disbanded and defunded the Sunni Sahwa militias; however, ISIS was gaining strength and poised to re-enter Iraq in 2013[25]. The ongoing civil war in Syria provided the necessary time and space ISIS required to reconstitute, and re-establish and expand the power it had achieved prior to the Awakening.

Syria, like Iraq, is not a homogeneous society. Syria's population of approximately 22 million, is 90% Arab with significant representation of Kurds and Armenians. The religious breakdown is approximately 74 percent Sunni Muslim, 12 percent Alawi, 3 percent Druze and 10 percent Christian[26]. The Syrian state is a patchwork of communities, ruled by the Alawites (or Alawis), under President Bashar al-Assad[27]. As in Iraq, the Sunni are not in a position of political power, and are faced with marginalization and abuse by the government. In 2011, the emerging Syrian civil war saw Syrian Opposition forces (including the Free Syrian Army, joined by the

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[22] Yosufi, 96.
[23] Antonio Perra, "From the Arab Spring to the Damascus Winter: The United States, Russia, and the New Cold War". *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3, no. 4 (09, 2016), 372.
[24] Stansfield, 147.
[25] Terrill, 15.
[26] Michael B. Bishku, "Is it an Arab Spring or Business as Usual? Recent Changes in the Arab World in Historical Context." *Journal of Third World Studies* 30, no. 1 (2013), 61.
[27] Paul Danahar, "The Collapse of the Old Middle East." In *The New Middle East: The World After the Arab Spring*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 27.

Islamic Front and Al-Nusra Front in 2012) backed by Western nations and other Regional

powers such as Saudi Arabia, seeking to oust Bashar, supported by regional powers such as Iran

and Hezbollah, and also by Russia and China who wish to maintain a strategic presence and

influence in the region, with Russia as Syria's largest supplier of arms as well as retaining a naval

base at Tartus; and, China as a major investor in Syria's oil industry[28].

Beyond these dynamics, the emergence of Syrian conflict with Kurdish militia in the

Democratic Foundation of Northern Syria, further complicated the situation, with both the US

and Russia supporting the Kurds, while Turkey opposed. When viewed as a regional conflict

alongside Iraq, the dynamics are heavily intertwined. Iraq is supported by the US & Iran; Assad

is supported by Iran, Iraq, Shi'ite militias, Russia, and Hezbollah; and, Syrian opposition forces

are supported by the US, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia[29]. This complex, multi-sided conflict

provided an opportunity for ISIS to move across the porous border, reconstitute, and undertake

military operations against Syria[30]. This was to an extent, consequences of Assad's own actions.

Following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Assad supported the insurgency, hosting jihadists

and ex-Ba'ath figures who fled. This allowed them to develop ties within Syria, which were then

exploited as ISIS entered Syria during the successful Iraqi anti-insurgency measures. With a

power vacuum created as a result of the Syrian civil war, ISIS was able to exploit their previous

networks and continue their operations toward establishing a Caliphate[31].

ISIS in Syria continued to benefit from support from Sunnis, marginalized by continued

oppression from the Assad regime and strife caused by the Syrian civil war. The Sunni Arab

tribes occupying the desert between Syria and Iraq provided ISIS necessary freedom of

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[28] Bishku, 68.
[29] Crowley, 32-33.
[30] *Ibid*, 32.
[31] Kaválek, 15.

movement, and combined with Assad's crackdown, and al-Maliki's actions in Iraq, continued to provide a source of support and recruits for ISIS[32]. This was particularly true when the Assad government blamed uprisings on Islamist terrorists supported by foreign powers, while conducting atrocities such as the massacre of more than 100 civilians in Houla in 2012[33]. Additionally, Assad exploited the situation with ISIS to provide a pretext to retain power. As stated by US Secretary of State John Kerry, Assad "himself has even been funding some of those extremists—even purposely ceding some territory to them in order to make them more of a problem so he can make the argument that he is somehow the protector against them[34]." With these dynamics in play, ISIS was able to exploit the power vacuum and harness anti-Assad sentiment to extend its power projection into areas such as ar-Raqqah, Dair az-Zaur, and Aleppo. This was accomplished even while being targeted by several of the other factions within Syria. As ISIS' ability to defeat opposition forces and hold terrain grew, and they were able to provide support and security to occupied areas where they were then seen as a stabilizing force and protector of the Sunni against the Shi'ites[35], more opposition groups within Syria publicly declared their support for ISIS[36].

In 2013, ISIS began to re-establish their presence in Iraq. ISIS had fought well against Syrian government forces and opposition forces. Additionally, as they re-entered Iraq, they performed as equally well against Iraqi Kurds and Iraq's Iranian-trained Shi'ite militias. This was largely due to their brutal tactics inflicting significant casualties, their maltreatment of prisoners and captured opposition forces, but also their willingness to accept significant

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[32] Melissa Dalton, "Defeating Terrorism in Syria: A New Way Forward." *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* (Feb 27, 2017).
[33] Bishku, 68.
[34] Perra, 371.
[35] Kaválek, 20.
[36] *Ibid*, 16.

casualties. This success permitted them to consolidate their forces in Raqqa in the spring of

2014[37]. ISIS also benefited from weakened opposition in Iraq. With the disbandment of Sahwa

groups and a growing reluctance of forces to oppose ISIS brutality, in August of 2014 ISIS

added to their gains when the city of Mosul fell to only 800 ISIS fighters, routing some 30,000

Iraqi Security Forces, subsequently displacing nearly a half-million people[38]. This success was

extended with the capture of Ramadi in May 2015.

With the US, Iraq, Syria, Kurds and others cooperating to defeat ISIS[39], their ability to

continue fighting was facilitated through the lack of committal by Turkey. With their own

security concerns, Turkey sought to mobilize Syrian opposition groups to continue to fight Assad

and Kurds while Western nations advocated for Assad to resign[40]. Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey

all have security concerns with Kurdish separatists. Turkey's actions in this regard showed that it

viewed Kurds as a larger threat than ISIS or other terrorist groups[41], as seen with their hosting a

conference of opposition groups[42], and reports that Turkey was also providing a base for al-

Qaeda and other military insurgents to launch attacks in Syria[43]. Turkey's position can be

understood, as they had been engaged in conflict with the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) since

1984[44]. Regardless of Turkey's focus on Syrian opposition groups, by 2015, ISIS had seized an

area in Syria and Iraq containing approximately 6 million people[45]. This would be the peak of

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[37] Terrill, 14.
[38] Yosufi, 91.
[39] Crowley, 32.
[40] Bishku, 68.
[41] Brian Katulis, "Assessing the Anti-ISIS Campaign After the First Year." *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* (Oct 01, 2015), 1.
[42] *Ibid*, 1.
[43] Jamal Wakim, "End of Al-Assad, or of Erdogan? Turkey and the Syrian Uprising." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Summer, 2014), 193.
[44] Bishku, 69.
[45] Terrill, 14.

their power, and having caught the full attention of the world, would begin to receive increased opposition with support from the US and other nations within the region.

ISIS' ability to project significant power and seize territory was based on exploitation of power vacuums which existed in Iraq and Syria. The first issue which would ensure they could not achieve their goal of creating a Caliphate, was that ISIS is an insurgency that doesn't adhere to political boundaries[46], thus seen as a risk to multiple states, ensuring they would face opposition across a wide spectrum. Further to various states fighting for their survival, the strategic interest of more powerful nations also factor significantly. Russia's strategic interest in Syria, combined with Iran's interest in defeating Sunni extremists and utilizing it as an opportunity to limit US influence, both those countries continue to support the Assad regime[47]. Additionally, US oil interests and desire for continued strategic influence in the region ensures their support to Iraq. Furthermore, with the complex situations in Iraq and Syria, Kurdish regions took advantage of power vacuums, instability, and support from the US, to gain strength. In both Iraq and Syria, these Kurdish forces have assisted in fighting ISIS, assisting to defeat ISIS in their attempts to seize Syrian Kurdistan, and the town of Kobani near Turkey[48].

Military involvement alone is not the sole reason for ISIS failure to continue their drive for a Caliphate. The 2014 election in Iraq resulted in al-Maliki replacing Haider al-Abadi as Prime Minster. This change in government attempted to secure cooperation and coordination between previously opposing factions such as the US and Iran. Additionally, the new government sought to build alliances and maintain neutrality in regional power struggles[49]. This

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[46] Ross Harrison, "Towards a Regional Strategy Contra ISIS." *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (Autumn, 2014), 1.
[47] Katulis, 6.
[48] Harrison, 3.
[49] Emma Sky, "Mission Still Not Accomplished in Iraq: Why the United States should Not Leave." *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 6 (Nov, 2017), 11.

approach diminishes ISIS' ability to leverage disenfranchisement and repression from Baghdad.
The risk moving forward, is as ISIS is rendered combat-ineffective on the ground in Syria and
Iraq, the eventual withdrawal of the combat power wielded by Western forces, may provide
opportunity for ISIS to again gain power. Additionally, and not to be understated, the barbarous
tactics utilized by ISIS made enemies of smaller ethnic groups and non-Sunni religious sects
across the region such as Kurds, Yazidis, Alawites, Christians, and others. The practice of killing
prisoners of war assured that the support base required to continue the insurgency could not be
sustained. The brutal nature of this approach, motivated potential opponents to fight to the death
rather than subject themselves to surrendering to ISIS who had shown they would mistreat, and
likely kill them[50].

ISIS grew into a powerful non-state actor as the result of several factors. None in
isolation would have provided the opportunity for an extremist organization to seize both land
and power to the extent ISIS had; however, the increasingly complex political and strategic
dynamics allowed ISIS to exploit gaps that would not have otherwise existed. The long standing
conflict between Sunni and Shi'a provided a genesis for the organization, which then capitalized
on mistrust and hatred. This was used to perpetrate sectarian violence both by government and
insurgents, perpetuating issues of marginalization and fear. Both policy and military operational
failings by the US following the 2003 invasion of Iraq provided the context within which ISIS
could incite the violence necessary to further their aims of destabilization in order to increase
their power. While nearly defeated in Iraq, the opportunity provided by the power vacuum
created upon the withdrawal of US troops in Iraq, and the emergence of the Syrian civil war,
gave ISIS the ability flood into the gaps with hope of drawing sufficient support to establish their

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[50] Terrill, 57.

Caliphate, and rule the region. Ultimately, ISIS was doomed to fail. A finite resource of

personnel, equipment and finances, against a united front, with waning support due to brutal

tactics and actions, ensured that their base could not be sustained. While fundamentally

contained, ISIS should not be considered defeated, as an ability to re-establish the reasons for

their growth of power still remain.

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