



## FPC Briefing: IS, Regional Security and the End of Sykes-Picot

Dr Simon Mabon and Dr Stephen Royle

In light of the recent gains made by the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State'<sup>1</sup> (IS) in Syria and Iraq, serious questions have been posed as to how best to respond to the group, in order to address threats to regional and global security. The group's actions have forced neighbouring and Western governments to reassess their positions in relation to the on going instability caused by IS and particularly its recent conquests in the north of Iraq.

In order to do this, the paper explores the emergence of the group, the conditions within Iraq and Syria that led to the emergence of the Islamic State, and poses suggestions for how to respond to the group. IS is a radical organisation which has generated a large degree of fear both within the Middle East and internationally. It has achieved this through its brutal treatment of those who stand against it and has sought to propagate its message and to cultivate fear through the use of social media as evidenced by its online videos. It possesses a strong appeal to local militants and international jihadists alike, many of whom are seduced by the group's rhetoric, which claims to offer a practical 'Islamic' solution to the Middle East's ills. It has therefore, through a combination of these factors and lack of alternatives in the areas it operates in, presented itself as a foundation for order amidst the ensuing chaos. It has also built strategic alliances with local Islamists, tribes and former military personnel, all of which has increased its influence, publicity and strength.

Successes in Tikrit, Fallujah and Mosul for example have incorporated the predominately Sunni anti al-Maliki movement, many of whom are not ideological but have local roots and a vested interest in the future of Iraq. Military advancements through such 'marriages of convenience' have therefore projected IS onto a global scale, but the make up of this movement should be understood within the framework that it exists. IS functions successfully within such environments because they are able to take advantage of the conditions, creating a snowball effect of support that as of yet has only gained in size and wealth. This should serve as a lesson and future warning to those who helped create the conditions currently serving the purpose of IS.

### **Understanding Sovereignty in the Middle East**

In order to understand the success of IS it is firstly necessary to explore the context from which they have emerged. With the fragmentation of the states of Syria and Iraq, peripheral groups were able to gain power while the authority of Damascus and Baghdad diminished. This is perhaps better highlighted by exploring ideas of sovereignty in the Middle East.

The body of literature on sovereignty is vast, providing numerous understandings of the term. Some, such as Max Weber, suggest that sovereignty should be understood as the possession of the legitimate use of force over a particular area. Thus, for Weber, sovereignty can be found in 'human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory',<sup>2</sup> and thus a state is a 'compulsory political association with continuous organization [whose] administrative staff successfully upholds a claim to the monopoly of legitimate use of force in the enforcement of its order [...] within a given territorial area'.<sup>3</sup>

Authors such as Steven Krasner have continued this development, discussing the violation of sovereignty, either willingly or unwillingly. It is the unwilling violation of sovereignty - without the

<sup>1</sup> The Islamic State, previously known as ISIS or Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shams. Al-Shams itself can mean Damascus, Greater Syria or as in this case the region of the Levant leading to the abbreviation ISIL. (The Arabic abbreviation is DAASH)

<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, 'Politik als Beruf,' *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (Muenchen, 1921), Available at: <http://media.pfeiffer.edu/lridener/dss/Weber/polvoc.html>

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1947) p154.



consent of a regime - that provides many of the conditions for the emergence of groups such as IS. The reduction of authority, coupled with violations of territorial integrity, has presented space and opportunities for groups to challenge the state. Many of the conditions that are integral to these violations are a consequence of the nature of the state building process in the region, leading to an artificial construction that comprises different tribal, ethnic and religious groups. In many cases, authority resides in the periphery of these states, rather than in the core. Many states are home to ethnic groups who possess either irredentist or secessionist aspirations, which challenge both the territorial integrity of the state and the authority of the rulers.<sup>4</sup> Further complicating this relationship is the religious dimension, where authority is often challenged by Islam.

Thus, it appears inevitable that when these factors interact with each other and, assuming that from this, the centralized authority is weakened as a consequence, power is diffused from the core to the periphery. This is rarely endorsed by ruling elites; rather, as a consequence of the interaction of these factors, peripheral groups are able to increase their autonomy within particular areas on the periphery of the state.

### **Syria and Iraq: Diminishing Sovereignty**

The emergence of IS in Syria and Iraq is no coincidence. Both have experienced the fragmentation of the state in recent years: Iraq following the US led invasion in 2003 and Syria post the Arab Uprisings in 2011. When the sovereignty of a state is eroded, chaotic spaces emerge, wherein powerful groups are able to exercise autonomy over particular areas. Through various tactics IS has been able to cultivate a fiercely loyal support base and also to lay claim to control over a much wider territory through creating a climate of fear. Yet in order to reach a stage where this is possible, domestic conditions must be such in order for the group to emerge.

Syria has a population of approximately 18 million, with over 90% being Arab and the rest a mix of other ethnicities such as Kurds and Armenians. An estimated 74% of the population are Sunni Muslim while 13% are Shi'a, Alawi and Ismaili. Christian denominations make up 10% of the population and Druze 3%.<sup>5</sup>

With regime control waning and the borders becoming increasingly porous, international fighters filtered through, strengthening radical Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra and Jaish al-Islam who were quick to fill the power vacuum left in predominately Sunni areas to the east of Al-Assad's control. Saudi Arabia, guided by former head of intelligence Prince Bandar provided support to Jaish al-Islam, a group led by Syrian Salafi Zahran Alloush, the son of a Saudi based cleric.<sup>6</sup> While their operations gained increased publicity during 2012 and 2013, it is the emergence of IS that has commanded the most fear, using Syria as a platform for launching its operations, embedding itself in towns and villages spanning from Aleppo to the border with Iraq.

In contrast to Syria, Iraq has a population of over 32 million people, ethnically divided amongst Arab (75-80%), Kurdish (15-20%) and smaller denominations such as Turkmen (5%).<sup>7</sup> Iraq's Sunni population accounts for approximately 32-37% of the overall population (predominately Arab and Kurd), and Shi'a 60-65%. Amongst this ethnic and religious mix, there are also 150 recognised tribes

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<sup>4</sup> This is typically what Migdal refers to as a strong society, but a weak state, although there are counter arguments to this, where rulers have been successful in statebuilding processes, despite the challenges posed by strong societies. A prime example of this is Saudi Arabia, where, despite the existence of strong tribal networks, the Al Saud dynasty has been able to create a strong state.

<sup>5</sup> CIA: World Fact Book, Syria, 20 July 2014, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

<sup>6</sup> I. Black, Guardian, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2013, Syria crisis: Saudi Arabia to spend millions to train new rebel force, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/syria-crisis-saudi-arabia-spend-millions-new-rebel-force>

<sup>7</sup> CIA: World Fact Book, Iraq, 20 July 2014, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>



that themselves are made up from an estimated 2000 smaller clans.<sup>8</sup> The north of Iraq is predominately populated by Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds, and while the latter have largely benefited since 2003 and the removal of Saddam Hussein, the former have struggled to contend with a Shi'a controlled government, holding numerous grievances reflecting power, land, finances and resources which resulted in disharmony and open revolt.

The prevalence of organisations such as AQI during the aftermath of the invasion was typical of the chaotic circumstances; a country further burdened by the disbanding of its military. The continuation of sectarian policies under the rule of Nouri al-Maliki only served to divide the state further.

IS has benefited from this situation, bolstering its ranks and establishing alliances with aggrieved tribes. For example, the Iraqi Tribal Revolutionaries Coalition has been able to gain considerable ground through its alignment with IS, enabling the capture of Mosul, Fallujah and Tikrit. Indeed, reports have indicated increased involvement of tribal groups and factions such as the 1920 Revolution Brigades, the Islamic Army, the Mujahedin Army, the Rashidin Army, Ansar al-Sunna and the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order.

The inability of leaders in both states to maintain authority over a given territory challenges a zero-sum reading of sovereignty; as a consequence, the erosion of state sovereignty has presented opportunities for other actors to exercise autonomy. What can then be seen in the case of both Syria and Iraq is that the fracturing of the state has created a vacuum in which IS is able to flourish. As such, peripheral areas have fallen under the control of IS. Furthermore, the use of sectarian narratives has aided the IS cause in both cases being able to refer to the state's Shi'a focus, engendering support from regional and global audiences.

### **Brand: IS**

Over recent months, IS has presented a strong image of itself through a combination of ideology, ruthless terror tactics, military force, financial astuteness and an adeptness in utilising social media. It identifies itself as the Sunni protector of Islam and a defence against colonialism. In a recent English video filmed at the Syrian border with Iraq, an IS spokesperson loyal to leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, highlighted a desire to remove the 'invisible' boundaries made by the Sykes-Picot agreement.<sup>9</sup> He also declared IS willingness to expand its influence across Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon until they reach 'Al-Quds, inshallah' (Jerusalem, God willing).<sup>10</sup>

Posturing against Al-Assad's regime and the government of al-Maliki, al-Baghdadi has been able to utilise anti-government networks in Syria and Iraq to finance the development of his organisation through racketeering and oil smuggling.<sup>11</sup> He has also simultaneously benefited from the sectarian schism by presenting his organisation as a Sunni vanguard against Iranian sponsored Shi'ism, appealing to those residing in countries such as Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait and perhaps most prominently Saudi Arabia. Saudi concern regarding the expansion of Shi'a Islam and Iran has been well documented, partly a by-product of its societal demographics and a desire to maintain regime

<sup>8</sup> H. D. Hassan, 15 March 2007, Iraq: Tribal Structure, Social, and Political Activities, CRS Report for Congress, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/81928.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 enabled the implantation of borders over the geographical Middle East. It was negotiated by the French diplomat François Georges-Picot and British Sir Mark Sykes with input from Russia. See James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle That Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011)

<sup>10</sup> ISIS – The End of Sykes-Picot, presented by spokesperson Abu Saffiya from Chile, June 29 2014, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyM0\\_sv5h88](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyM0_sv5h88)

<sup>11</sup> R. Khalaf, Financial Times July 4 2014, 'Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Isis leader', <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ec63d94c-02b0-11e4-a68d-00144feab7de.html#axzz36WPWiRgC>

stability.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, despite its government's attempts to quash links to IS, evidenced in a letter written by the Royal Embassy in London addressing allegations from within the British media<sup>13</sup>, Saudi involvement continues to be highlighted. According to former head of MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove, the recently deposed head of Saudi Intelligence, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, had warned him of the impending struggle, inferring that 'More than a billion Sunnis have simply had enough of them (Shi'a).'<sup>14</sup>

With financial support, a burgeoning artillery and sectarian support, IS has opted for an aggressive military approach, paying for the service of professional soldiers and aligning itself with a number of local factions who likewise are seeking to remove state and governmental structures within the region. However, its radical approach and military aggressiveness has also alienated a number of allies, not least Al-Qaeda, Jaish Al-Islam and Jabhat Al-Nusra, who have become increasingly threatened by IS's monopoly over the so called 'Islamic' response. Nevertheless, this has not affected its momentum or popularity as according to Peter Neuman, it is estimated that 80% of Western fighters in Syria have joined the group.<sup>15</sup>

### **Moving Forward**

Militant or radical networks can thrive within difficult conditions and have a tendency to galvanise persons around a common cause, whether the optimal goal is based on ideology or strategic purposes. As seen across the Middle East, internal socioeconomic issues and persisting regional violence can combine, leaving a number of communities vulnerable to uncontrollable circumstances. While sometimes this can lead to dissatisfaction with the government, protests and a surge in crime, it also has the potential to serve more radical purposes, inviting external elements or encouraging local persons to participate in acts of violence or terror. This is especially the case with the challenging economic conditions faced by many, furthered by the increasing number of refugees across the region. These interactions therefore have the ability to create internal-external dynamics that can spillover and threaten the stability of surrounding governments or regimes.

In sum, IS thrives on the conditions in Syria and Iraq, it also relies on the support of local actors through either fear or military support. As yet, it does not pose an immediate symmetric threat to other countries in the region, but these countries should also be aware of their actions as to not support the growth of the organisation or potentially invite an asymmetric struggle within their own borders.

The chaotic conditions created in Iraq and Syria have allowed for the emergence and strengthening of IS. Essentially, this was precipitated in Iraq after the 2003 invasion. A subsequent failure to provide any political balance or order therefore contributed to the internal-external dynamics within the region, and the escalation of sectarian violence. Syria on the other hand became a safe haven for those fleeing Iraq, but while its collapse into civil war is partly due to its mismanagement of internal political and socioeconomic conditions, the uncertainty that reigned created a vacuum for opportunists to fill.

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<sup>12</sup> It is estimated that Shi'a account for approximately 10-15% of Saudi Arabia's population. Pew Research, October 7 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population>

<sup>13</sup> Al Arabiy News Wednesday, 9 July 2014, "Saudi refutes UK media claims of 'ISIS support'", <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/world/2014/07/09/Saudi-Arabia-refutes-UK-media-allegations-of-supporting-ISIS-.html>.

<sup>14</sup> P. Cockburn, The Independent, July 21 2014, 'Iraq crisis: How Saudi Arabia helped Isis take over the north of the country', <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/iraq-crisis-how-saudi-arabia-helped-isis-take-over-the-north-of-the-country-9602312.html>.

<sup>15</sup> BBC News, 16 June 2014, Profile: Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24179084>



The complex nature in which we have witnessed the rise of IS serves as a timely reminder of how interactions can create other interactions which cannot always be controlled. To this end, each and every actor is responsible for the conditions that have been created, conditions that have allowed IS to gain in strength. Nevertheless, there is a need to stop the growth of this organisation as to prevent further destabilisation and humanitarian disaster. There are no magic solutions to this problem but what can be asserted in the immediacy is a need for stability and a semblance of order in the region. From then, long-term plans can be made that encourage self-organisation and greater societal involvement in political processes. To this end, there are suggestions that can be made to stop momentum from both socioeconomic and security perspectives.

### **Possible Approaches:**

1. Immediate attention should be placed on Iraq as to create balance and a degree of order:
  - a. At this stage, military intervention may be required to stop IS advancement before it and its allies reach Baghdad (and Kurdish strongholds). This should include a prominent role for the Iraqi army as creating a 'stalemate' will create new conditions for potential dialogue.
  - b. It may well have to be conceived that in order to isolate IS in Iraq, dialogue should focus on creating autonomous regions and the sharing of resources.
  - c. In addition to Iraq, IS's hold in Syria should also be challenged as to decrease its ability to move between the two countries. This would require the creation of new alliances amongst the non-radical elements within the rebellion, and potentially an understanding with Al-Assad and his forces as to not weaken either side during this interim period.
  - d. Engage with other regional actors in the response to IS in an effort to diffuse sectarian tensions.
  
2. Decreasing the influence of organisations such as IS at a regional level requires responding to the political and socioeconomic conditions that have been created:
  - a. Continued and increased support for burgeoning refugee camps in the short term should be heralded, while in respect of the long term political solutions reflecting integration or return for example should be sought.
  - b. Provide financial and technical support for host countries such as Jordan and Lebanon in an attempt to alleviate their economic and political strains and encourage acceptance of refugee integration.
  - c. De-escalate manageable local conflicts, notably Israel and Palestine by encouraging long-term stability through the removal of the occupation.
  - d. Encourage vigilance against the funding of militant groups such as IS, particularly in the Gulf States. For example, Saudi Arabia's links to Jaish Al-Islam have been well documented<sup>16</sup>, a commitment that could come back to haunt them. There are also strong suggestions that non-governmental actors within the Gulf region may be contributing to the sponsoring of such organisations, this will need to be addressed by regional leaders.
  
3. In each country stability is paramount, but in the long term this should be ensured by a gradual process of societal involvement in the development of state structures.

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<sup>16</sup> I. Black, The Guardian, Thursday 7 November 2013, Syria crisis: Saudi Arabia to spend millions to train new rebel force, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/syria-crisis-saudi-arabia-spend-millions-new-rebel-force>

These recommendations reflect much of the literature on sovereignty, wherein authority and territoriality are aligned. In addition, the possession of a legitimate monopoly on the use of violence will prevent the emergence of groups such as IS.

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