



The ISIS Crisis and the Broken Politics of the Middle East

Nader Hashemi

University of Denver

November, 2016

Introduction

When future historians of the Middle East look back on the early 21st century, the rise of The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or the Islamic State) will be discussed as a key turning point in the politics of the region.¹ As a result of ISIS' expansion in 2014, the boundary between Iraq and Syria has effectively dissolved. The one hundred year-old colonial borders of the Middle East have not faced such a radical restructuring since Gamal Abdel Nasser attempted to unify Egypt and Syria (1958-1961), and Saddam Hussein's attempt at annexing Kuwait (1990).² While these prior attempts to re-fashion borders were short-lived, the phenomenon of the Islamic State will not disappear as quickly. In part, this is because the forces that have produced ISIS are driven not from above, as in the aforementioned cases, but are a result of social conditions that have emerged from below and which have been brewing in the region for some time.³ ISIS is a reflection of the broken politics in the Middle East that are a product of these dire social conditions.



Nader Hashemi is Associate Professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, and Director at the Center for Middle East Studies. His most recent work is called *Sectarianism: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*. He specializes in Middle East and Islamic affairs, religion and democracy, secularism, comparative politics and political theory, politics of the Middle East, democracy and human rights, and Islam-West relations.

What is the best framework of analysis to explain the rise and expansion of ISIS? Is the problem with ISIS fundamentally due to something inherent in Islam or in Arab culture? Richard Haass, the President of the Council on Foreign Relations, has argued that the

Middle East “is a deeply flawed part of the world that never came to terms with modernity.”⁴ Similarly, President Obama on several occasions has spoken about “ancient sectarian differences” between Sunnis and Shias, observing that the turmoil in the region is “rooted in conflict that date back millennia.”⁵ His implication is that today we are witnessing a Muslim version of Europe’s wars of religion in the 16th century, and there is little the international community can do to ameliorate the problems facing the region; these conflicts must burn themselves out. Or is the problem with ISIS fundamentally connected to the legacy of US intervention in Iraq in 2003? Did a failed US policy toward the Middle East inadvertently create ISIS, as some have argued?⁶

This paper argues that the twin themes of human rights and democracy, or rather, their general absence in the Arab world, can best explain the rise and expansion of ISIS. High levels of state-sanctioned human rights violations and political authoritarianism have been core features of the politics of the region for several decades, and it is the consequences of these policies that have fomented the growth of radical Islamist militancy. The political vacuum that these crises have produced—engendered by war, state collapse and breakdown—has provided a fertile soil for the emergence and expansion salafi-jihadi Islam for which ISIS is the most recent iteration. Until these social conditions are changed, there is no reasonable expectation that the ISIS crisis can be ameliorated.

The Destructive Legacy of Political Tyranny and War

There are many dimensions to the ISIS crisis. Structurally speaking, the roots of this problem can be situated at the intersection of two sets of political developments that have been brewing in the region for decades. These developments have quietly corroded the societies and politics of the Middle East, and have converged at the present moment to produce a set of social conditions conducive to the rise of the Islamic State. The first development, which has a longer history, is a direct by-product of political authoritarianism. The second development, which is more recent, is the destabilizing effects that flow from war and state breakdown.

For most of its modern history, political authoritarianism has been a key feature of the politics of the Middle East. Survey data has consistently revealed that among the regions of the world that are least democratic, the Arab Middle East has repeatedly topped the list.⁷ The roots of this go back to the colonial era and the rise of modern states: an institutional legacy of colonialism was bequeathed to the region, where the military, the police and the bureaucracy emerged as the strongest state institutions of the post-independence period.⁸ An explanation on the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East is a vast topic beyond the scope of this paper. One thing can be asserted with certainty: the weakness of democratization and liberalization in the Arab-Islamic world cannot be explained by Orientalist theories about the sui generis nature of the Islamic world and its alleged problem with modernity.⁹

Authoritarian regimes are not monolithic. There is considerable variation in terms of the nature of state-society relations and the extent of political tyranny. At the extreme end of

the spectrum, there are those regimes that Eqbal Ahmad has called “neofascist.” The survival of these regimes is dependent on “widespread repression of political opposition and social institutions outside of state control (religious, educational, and professional associations, labor and peasant organizations). The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a hardening of the authoritarian arteries of these states, the systematization of terror, the ‘modernization’ and ‘rationalization’ of their repressive institutions.”¹⁰ As a result, one of the enduring characteristics of these neofascist regimes is that they are “the most blatant contemporary violators of human rights in both [a] substantive and procedural manner.”¹¹

Eqbal Ahmad’s analysis of these political systems was in the context of the early 1980s with a view toward the entire global south. By the late 20th century, however, these patterns of repressive rule further intensified in some countries and several of the worst forms of neofascist regimes could be found in the Arab-Islamic world. They were effectively “national security state[s]” where the ruling elites viewed the “state as absolute, the individual as unimportant.” The armed forces were the most important institution in the country, and were viewed by ruling elites as a “major force for constructive social change.” Beyond the armed forces, there exists a vast network of “secret political organizations ... [that] permeate society. Their highest officials rank among the countries’ most powerful men.”¹² Iraq and Syria under their respective Ba’ath parties most closely approximate this description.¹³

Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was a human rights catastrophe. Upon seizing power, Hussein expanded the institutions of violence and ruled the country through a combination of lies, fear, show trials and a vast network of secret police and intelligence organizations. The Shia population suffered persecution, and minorities like the Kurds were harshly repressed. When they resisted these forms of oppression, they were subjected to what Human Rights Watch called “a campaign of extermination” that amounted to the “crime of genocide.”¹⁴ In 1990, Iraq ranked number one in the world for the number of disappeared people. The UN characterized the human rights situation in the 1990s as being “of an exceptionally grave character—so grave that it has few parallels in the years that have passed since the Second World War.”¹⁵ Syria has suffered the same fate under the rule of the House of Assad.

In his novella, *The Silence and the Roar*, the Syrian writer Nihad Sirees paints a vivid portrait of life under the Assad regime. “You better be careful,” the lead protagonist, Fathi Sheen, tell his mother. “A joke about the Leader costs whoever cracks it six months’ hard time.” Parallels with North Korea abound: political life revolves around the cult of personality of the noble Leader. “If ever it became necessary to play a song about love, it would have to be a song about love of the Leader. All feelings must be oriented toward the Leader. Love, ardor and rapture, infatuation and affection, passion and ecstasy: they must all be reserved for the Leader. Wasting such emotion on a worthless young woman is nothing less than moral decay itself.”¹⁶

A comparison of the human rights records of Arab League member states places Syria at the extreme end of a spectrum of repression. Arguably, only Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was worse. The 1982 massacre in Hama killed roughly 20,000 people in one week and

is frequently mentioned to highlight the depredations of the Assad regime. Less well known are the horrors of Syria's vast prison system. Tens of thousands have passed through its doors. Untold numbers have disappeared. A 1996 Human Rights Watch report on the notorious Tadmor prison describes "deaths under torture" and "summary executions on a massive scale." One former inmate described the place as a "kingdom of death and madness" and emaciated prisoners were compared to "survivors of Nazi concentration camps."¹⁷

But this was just one jail in a veritable torture archipelago. The full story of Syria's prison system and internal human rights nightmare under the Assads has yet to be told. The horrors of Syria's prison system have grown exponentially since the Arab Spring of 2011. The 55,000 photographs of torture victims smuggled out of Syria by a military defector code-named Caesar, authenticated by Human Rights Watch, have given us a glimpse. When the full truth emerges, it may well rival the horrors of the Soviet Union's prison system chronicled in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*.¹⁸

The key point that has a bearing on the rise of ISIS is that this legacy of despotism and tyranny has destroyed the social fabric of Iraq and Syria. This process was set in motion long before the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the 2011 Syrian uprising, both of which exacerbated a process of social decay. The concept of social cohesion is relevant here. Social scientists have long recognized that stable polities are rooted in a dense network of voluntary citizen associations that help to sustain civil society and community relations. This generates social capital and social trust and produces cooperation between citizens of diverse backgrounds. Over time conditions are created that enhance social integration, cultivating ties that bind society together, thus promoting peace and internal stability.¹⁹

The legacy of political authoritarianism in the Arab world has produced the opposite of these trends. Instead of social cohesion, there has been social disintegration, instead of social trust there is widespread fear and distrust of others. Suspicion of paid informants of the state's intelligence services is a normal part of life. "The walls have ears" phenomenon is a common feature of police states. The net result of the habituation of these patterns of social and political life over the course of decades is the creation of a culture of fear, paranoia, and deceit replete with conspiracy theories and the desire to exact revenge. When society is subjected to a calamitous shock, via war or state collapse, collective disorientation sets in and the doors to radicalization are opened.²⁰

Consider the case of Iraq. For the last thirty-six years, Iraq has been deeply traumatized by ongoing war. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) killed and wounded approximately one million people on both sides. It destroyed Iraq's main oil terminals, refineries and petrochemical plants and cost Iraq approximately \$452 billion. There was a short respite before the onset of the Iraq-Kuwait war (1990-1991). During this second war, most of Iraq's remaining economic infrastructure was destroyed, and severe economic sanctions were imposed by the United Nations, under the infamous "Oil for Food" program. Shortly thereafter, there was a sharp increase in malnutrition, infant mortality and disease that devastated Iraqi society during the 1990s. This was followed by the

2003 Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq which quickly produced an armed insurgency, a partial collapse of the state, a sectarian civil war, and the fragmentation of the country. Several hundred thousands of Iraqis were killed and wounded.²¹ A January 2016 UN Report noted that violence suffered by civilians “remains staggering,” with at least 18,800 killed between January 1, 2014 and October 31, 2015. More than 3.2 million people were displaced during the same period.²²

Syria’s story is similar with two critical differences: the war has been of shorter duration, but its social effects have been more devastating. Since March 2011, an expanding war has engulfed the entire country producing a mass exodus which the UN has called the “worst refugee crisis since World War II.”²³ The war has included an extreme human rights crisis that is near genocidal in its dimensions (more on the human rights crisis later). As the conflict entered its fifth year, two reports established that 2014 was the deadliest year of the Syrian conflict, with 250,000 deaths and close to a million wounded, a figure that reflects six percent of Syria’s population. During this period, life expectancy dropped by 27 years and more than half of Syria’s 23 million population became internally displaced or fled the country as refugees. 82 percent of Syrians now live in poverty.²⁴

One comprehensive UN report noted that the “future growth of the Syrian economy has been compromised by the systematic collapse and destruction of its economic foundations as its infrastructure and institutions, human and physical capital, as well as the wealth of the nation [have] been obliterated.”²⁵ The future viability of Syria as a cohesive nation-state is now in question.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center noted that as of 2015, Syria and Iraq have the largest number of displaced people in the world. Collectively, 14 million people have been forced to flee their homes. “One thing is clear: the situation in the region has become utterly unsustainable,” observed António Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He called this crisis “a cancer that risks spreading and metastasizing.”²⁶

It is precisely for these reasons of state breakdown and collapse, that ISIS has been able to establish its state in parts of Syria and Iraq and not in other parts of the Islamic world. Iraq and Syria are unique in the sense that these states have been most adversely affected by the twin legacies of political authoritarianism and the consequences that flow from war and state collapse, thus creating a vacuum that has been filled by radical Islamism.

The political illegitimacy of the state in Iraq and Syria has also exacerbated these trends. The sectarian policies of the ruling regimes in Baghdad and Damascus have alienated Sunni communities, allowing ISIS to exploit their grievances to generate support and claim the mantle of leadership among persecuted Sunni populations. In the case of Iraq, Nuri al-Maliki’s government exploited a de-Ba’athification law to marginalize and discriminate against Sunni politicians. His majoritarian and authoritarian style of rule as prime minister (2006-2014) exacerbated communal tensions and bred

Sunni alienation which ISIS successfully exploited. Peaceful protests by Iraqi Sunnis were repressed. One example was the Al-Hawija massacre on April 23, 2013 that killed 50 people and injured over 100, enflaming Sunni public opinion across Iraq.²⁷

In the case of Syria, the problem is measurably much worse. The House of Assad has been in power for more than 45 years. In contrast to Iraq, no elections are held, and there is neither a free press nor a functioning civil society. The key positions of power and the senior officer corps are staffed by Assad loyalists, many of them from the same Alawite minority as Bashar al-Assad. After the 2011 Syrian uprising, the base of support of the Syrian regime narrowed to a core Alawite constituency, enhancing the perception among 70 percent of Syrians who are Sunni that Assad's minority-led regime is willing to retain power at all costs. Strong regional support from Iran and Hezbollah to sustain the Assad regime has only deepened this conviction.

Summarizing the connection between Sunni alienation and an affinity for ISIS, the *New York Times* astutely observed that by "employing a mix of persuasion and violence" ISIS has expanded its influence in the Arab world. It has been able to "present itself as the sole guardian of Sunni interests in a vast territory cutting across Iraq and Syria. Ideologically unified, the Islamic State is emerging as a social and political movement in many Sunni areas, filling a void in the absence of solid national identity and security." In the face of highly sectarian regimes, "some Sunnis [are] willing to tolerate the Islamic State in areas where they lack another defender, especially in conservative communities like the ones in western Iraq and eastern Syria, where the group is strongest." According to one analyst, as a result of the spread of sectarianism in the region, 'under the skin of every single Sunni there is a tiny Daesh [ISIS supporter]'.²⁸

Why All Roads Lead to Damascus

The conflict in Syria is essential to understanding the rise and expansion of ISIS. Without it, there would be no global ISIS crisis as we understand it today. This relationship between Syria and ISIS highlights a key argument of this paper: the regional turmoil plaguing the Middle East is the byproduct of a severe human rights crisis caused by the war in Syria. Syria is like a "geopolitical Chernobyl," that continues to "spew radioactive instability and extremist ideology over the entire region."²⁹ These issues are deeply interlinked and cannot be over-emphasized: resolving the political conflict within Syria is an essential precondition to solving the ISIS crisis.³⁰

ISIS is connected to Syria in several important ways that are under-appreciated in the global debate. The dominant narrative suggests that ISIS is most deeply linked to Iraq. Most mainstream accounts locate the origins of ISIS in its parent organization, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), founded by Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, which surfaced after the 2003 US invasion and occupation.³¹ This is undoubtedly true, but to leave the story here ignores critical subsequent developments.

After an impressive start, by 2008, the salafi-jihadist movement in Iraq was on the decline. By 2010, AQI was beaten down, reduced to a few hundred core followers. Its demise was due to a combination of factors: the indiscriminate violence that AQI

unleashed on Iraqi society, an American troop surge, the creation of the “Sunni Awakening” (*Sahwa*) councils that fought against AQL, along with promises of Sunni inclusion in a Shia-dominated Iraq. By the time American combat troops were withdrawn in 2011, most of AQL’s senior leaders and field operatives were eliminated and both Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Osama Bin Laden had been killed.³²

These events overlapped with the Arab Spring. When the Arab Spring began in Syria in March 2011, no ISIS or Al Qaeda presence existed in Syria. Nonviolent protesters chanting nonsectarian slogans formed the bulk of the opposition to the Syrian regime, who like their counterparts in other Arab countries, were demanding democracy, dignity and social justice. The Assad regime (backed by Iran and Russia) responded with criminal brutality. As a direct result, a set of social conditions were created that gradually militarized a peaceful uprising and then radicalized it.³³ As the crackdown continued and the violence increased to near genocidal levels, a political and ideological vacuum ensued. It was soon filled by salafi-jihadis, many of whom were supported by regional powers, who benefited from the ensuing chaos and devastation. Many of the top leaders of these radical Islamists groups were deliberately released from Assad’s prison as part of a strategy to sectarianize the uprising and remove the global spotlight on the Assad family’s 41 year rule.³⁴ Radical Salafism rose from the ashes of the internal conflict in Syria and was given a new lease on life. It continues to expand to this day.

By the end of the first year of the Syrian uprising, all leading human rights organizations—Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria—had charged the regime in Damascus with state-sanctioned “war crimes” and “crimes against humanity.”³⁵ By a wide margin, the Assad regime has been responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths during the course of this war. According to the Syrian Network for Human rights, from March 2011 to October 2015, regime forces were responsible for 96 percent of civilian deaths; ISIS was responsible for approximately one percent.³⁶ As the conflict continued and deepened, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, repeatedly called on the UN Security Council to refer the Assad regime to the International Criminal Court; a move blocked by Russia and China. During this time, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a global warning that “Syria is now the biggest humanitarian and peace and security crisis facing the world.”³⁷ The human rights catastrophe that has engulfed Syria worsens with every passing year. Syria is the primary moral and humanitarian catastrophe of the 21st century.

This conflict has produced the world’s worst refugee crisis since World War II, a chemical weapons crisis, a rape crisis, a health crisis, a hunger crisis, a torture crisis, a cultural heritage crisis—and, as a consequence of all the foregoing—an ISIS crisis. These quasi-genocidal conditions have created a fertile soil for the rebirth and expansion of radical Islamist militancy in the heart of the Arab world.³⁸ ISIS is connected to Syria in other distinct ways that tie their futures together. According to US intelligence, two-thirds of ISIS’ military assets are located in Syria.³⁹ Were ISIS to be defeated in Iraq, it could entrench itself in eastern Syria where it feeds off local

support and where no local military force or bombing campaign can easily dislodge it. The Syrian town of Raqqa is the de facto capital of ISIS. Most executions of foreign hostages have taken place in Syria. ISIS was reborn in Syria; its future will be determined in Syria.

The argument that the conflict could be “contained” within Syria’s borders is easily exposed now as a fallacy. From the start, the question of how the international community should respond to Syria led to divisive debate. The prominent American international relations theorist and foreign policy analyst John Mearsheimer, invoking realpolitik arguments, argued that the conflict in Syria did not affect core strategic interests of the West and was of “little importance for American security.”⁴⁰ The 2015 ISIS-inspired terror attacks in three NATO countries (in the cities of Paris, San Bernardino and Ankara), and the wave of ISIS-related attacks in early 2016 in Jakarta, Istanbul, Baghdad, Philadelphia and Burkina Faso suggest otherwise.

Similarly, Stephen Walt has argued publicly that the quickest way of ending the conflict would be for the Syrian people to surrender to the Assad regime. “What may be best for the Syrian people in terms of ending human suffering is to say [to them] we are not going to drive him from power... but that ultimately if what you want is fewer people dying... you might have to acknowledge that he will remain in power.... This is at least a possibility we will have to begin to reconcile ourselves to.”⁴¹ Walt’s proposal is undoubtedly correct, but only in the same sense that the conflicts in Rwanda and Bosnia twenty years earlier could have been ended sooner if opposition forces surrendered to Hutu and Serbian governments. The Obama Administration, informed by the legacy of the Iraq invasion, has been persuaded by these arguments.⁴²

Syria clearly demonstrates, as Bosnia did twenty years earlier, that wars which involve massive human rights violations on a near genocidal scale cannot be contained or ignored. Their destabilizing affects eventually pose a direct threat to international peace and security. In an age of globalization, the ripple effects are felt around the world.

None of this “was inevitable,” observes Rania Abouzeid in her forensic investigation on the rise and expansion of ISIS. “The Syrian revolution—and the hesitant, confused international reaction to it—paved the way for the resurrection of a militant Islam that would turn vast regions of Iraq and Syria into borderless jihadi strongholds and inch closer to redrawing the map of the Middle East.”⁴³ The chairperson of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, the distinguished jurist Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, observed that the inaction of the international community “nourished the violence” consuming Syria and “its most recent beneficiary [has been] ISIS.”⁴⁴

The Crushing of the Arab Spring and the Rise of ISIS

There is a longstanding and widely recognized inverse relationship between democratic societies and violence. The more that democracy advances, in the form of political accountability, public transparency and the peaceful transfer of power, the less the likelihood of violence. This is a variation of the famous democratic peace theory that

recognizes democratic societies are more internally peaceful and less likely to go to war than their non-democratic counterparts.⁴⁵ This theory is pertinent to understanding the rise of ISIS.

Observing the general turmoil in the Middle East today, it is easy to forget that a few years ago, the region looked quite different. The 2011 Arab Spring brought hope to people of the region of a brighter political future. Starting in North Africa and moving in quick succession across the Middle East, pro-democracy revolts swept three longstanding dictators from power and came close to removing another two. The Arab Spring shook the foundations of Middle Eastern authoritarianism while capturing the imagination of the entire world.

Al Qaeda's response to the Arab Spring is revealing. It was shocked by a turn of events that produced ideological confusion and organizational incoherency. In an important study, *Jihadi Discourse in the Wake of the Arab Spring*,⁴⁶ the authors note that during the Arab Spring salafi-jihadi groups were both impotent and unpopular. The reasons for this are self-evident. For a moment it appeared that political change could be achieved via peaceful protest rather than violent revolution. This undermined one of the central ideological claims of Al-Qaeda which had long argued that dictators could only be removed via armed struggle; democratic elections and nonviolent protests could never work. As Ayman Al-Zawahiri put it: "What is truly regrettable is the rallying of thousands of duped Muslim youth in voter queues before ballot boxes instead of lining them up to fight in the cause of Allah."⁴⁷ As result, the ideological appeal of Islamic militancy during this period fell precipitously throughout the Arab-Islamic world.

The Arab Spring was rolled back due to a counter-revolution led by the previous ruling elites, the deep state and its regional allies (primarily Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates).⁴⁸ The promise of peaceful political change and the door to democratization was slammed shut. As a direct result, there was an increase in violence and extremism across the region. This demonstrates another important relationship that is central to the politics of the Middle East: when democratic openings are closed and moderate forms of political Islam are crushed, radical Islam thrives as a consequence. The case of Egypt after the 2013 military coup demonstrates this point.

General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi came to power by toppling Egypt's first democratically elected President, Mohammad Morsi. The backdrop to his seizure of power was an orgy of violence that Human Rights Watch described as a "likely crime against humanity" and "what may have been the worst single-day killing of protesters in modern history."⁴⁹ The reference is to the Rab'a al-adawiya massacre on August 14, 2013 that killed 1000 people in downtown Cairo in a few hours. These events unofficially brought an end to the Egyptian democratization process that began with the ouster of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. Since then, there has been a significant rise in violence and political extremism across the country.

In the twenty-two month period since Egypt's July 2013 coup, there have been more than 700 attacks across Egypt compared to 90 attacks in the previous twenty-two

months. Human Rights Watch has reported a figure of 41,000 political prisoners (mostly members of the Muslim Brotherhood), many of whom have been tortured. According to Amnesty International, Egypt issued 509 death sentences in 2014, the second highest number in the world.⁵⁰

The number of young people radicalized by these events is difficult to measure. To the extent that anecdotal evidence, media reports and trends on social media are a reflection of this tendency, it is accurate to state that Egypt has become a breeding ground for radical Islamism. Marc Lynch has argued that, notwithstanding the Muslim Brotherhood's social conservatism and illiberalism, they performed an important role as a "firewall against extremism."⁵¹ A politically active Egyptian with a religious identity could find expression in the public sphere by joining the Muslim Brotherhood and participating in electoral politics. Since the coup and the attempt to eradicate the Muslim Brotherhood, this option no longer exists. The two choices that remain for Egyptian youth are: 1) to remain silent and accept the current neo-fascist order, or 2) to contemplate joining a utopian revolutionary political project such as ISIS. There is no third alternative.⁵² Tales from Egypt's notorious prison system confirm this argument.

Mohammad Soltan, an Egyptian-American, was twenty-five years old when he was arrested in the summer of 2013. He spent twenty-one months in jail; during sixteen of these months, Soltan was on a hunger strike. He lost 160 pounds, risking organ failure. When he emerged from prison he could not walk. In a special *New York Times* profile, he discussed the torture and brutality he faced but also revealed details of the internal political debates among prisoners: several of his cellmates were ISIS supporters.⁵³

"They walked around with a victorious air," he recalled. They would frequently point to supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and state: "look, you idiots, your model doesn't work." The ISIS supporters would then proceed to "make very simple arguments telling us that the world doesn't care about [democratic] values and only understands violence." He also noted that because "of the gravity of the situation [we] were all in, by the time the ISIS guys were finished speaking, everyone, the liberals, the Brotherhood people, would be left completely speechless. When you're in that type of situation and don't have many options left, for some people these kinds of ideas start to make sense."⁵⁴

Tunisia, the one Arab Spring country that did undergo a successful democratic transition, provides an alternative model to that of Egypt. Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of Ennahda, has observed that the "only way to truly defeat ISIS is to offer a better product to the millions of young Muslims in the world." It is called "Muslim democracy." He noted that that most "young people don't like ISIS—see how many millions flee from it—but they won't accept life under tyrants either." This "better product" must be a political system that is democratic, that respects human rights and that gives Islamic values political space.⁵⁵

It is not a coincidence that ISIS emerged and attracted followers *after* the crushing of the Arab Spring, highlighting the relationship between democratization and violence.

The simplest formulation of this insight into modern politics was perhaps best articulated by John F. Kennedy in 1962: “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.”⁵⁶

The Political Theology of ISIS

A significant part of the ISIS crisis is related to the development and mainstreaming of a particular Sunni interpretation of Islam. This interpretation is deeply sectarian, misogynistic, authoritarian, intolerant, anti-democratic, puritanical, ultraconservative and most importantly—it legitimates the use of violence against others, particularly fellow Muslims. This brand of Islam has a specific intellectual genealogy and political history, including a history of collusion with Western powers, which has not received sufficient attention in the global debate on ISIS. Any comprehensive understanding of the ISIS crisis would be incomplete with examining this dimension of the problem.

Khaled Abou El Fadl has described this phenomenon as the “rise of the culture of ugliness in modern Islam.” In the context of Islam’s 1400 year history, it is a recent development but it has obtained a critical mass, sinking deep roots in Muslim societies in the latter half of the 20th century. Its spread has had a corrosive effect on Muslims communities and it “continues to be the single most important obstacle to articulating reasonable narratives of legitimate possibilities of Islam’s contribution to human goodness.”⁵⁷ The dissemination and proliferation of this intolerant interpretation of Islam can be traced to the heart of the Arab-Islamic world and is linked to the internal policies of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Wahhabism, a puritanical interpretation of Islam associated with the teachings of the 18th century evangelist Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d.1792), originated in Saudi Arabia. Concerned with the decline of Islamic civilization, he developed a theology that was a reflection of the austere desert surroundings he came from, the Najd region of central Arabia. The galvanizing power of his message was rooted in an uncompromising belief that the moral renewal of Islam could only take place by the cleansing of *kufr* (unbelief) from the *ummah* (Islamic community).⁵⁸

His analysis of the problem of civilizational decline was that Muslims have forgotten God and the unity of his message (*tawheed*) because of the reliance on heretical innovations and the infiltration of corrupt rituals and beliefs associated with Shiism, Sufism and other deviant Sunni practices. His writings rejected much of the classic Islamic jurisprudential tradition and the plurality of schools of thought connected to this tradition. Orthodoxy was narrowly defined in pursuit of an absolutist and insular reading of Islam.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab demonstrated hostility toward all forms rationalism and intellectual thought. He viewed fields of knowledge related to the humanities, especially philosophy, as a unique corruption connected to “the sciences of the devil.”⁵⁹ Most forms of human creativity and artistic expression such as music were repudiated. He also preached hostility toward non-Muslims, who should never be befriended or taken as allies.

Arguably his most destructive teaching was the promotion of the practice of *takfir*—accusing another Muslim of apostasy, thereby sanctioning violence against her or him.

In justifying *takfir*, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab developed a methodology that was to be emulated by radical Islamist groups in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. He would scour “the vast annals of the [Islamic] tradition in search of cruel anti-humanistic reports that have long been dead and then rehabilitat[ed], [spread], and empower[ed] them so that they [could] justify the commission of acts of ugliness.”⁶⁰ This would give these acts of violence an aura of Islamic authenticity and sanctity that ordinary Muslims, unversed in the details of their religious tradition, would find difficult to repudiate.

Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's views would have remained marginal were it not for several critical developments that allowed them to expand globally. The first issue is the overarching challenge of modernity facing Muslims in the late 19th century in terms of the rise of the West, especially the intellectual, moral and political issues associated with this challenge. This produced a variety of responses both radical and reformist, and staunchly secular or traditionally conservative.⁶¹ Within this context, a salafist theological orientation emerged.

At its inception in the late 19th century, Salafism was a broad reformist intellectual response that sought to negotiate the tensions between tradition and modernity by going back to the origins of Islam for inspiration and answers. Specifically, it elevated the moral example of the early Muslim community (*al-salaf al-salih*) as one to be emulated in order to meet modern challenges. In this sense, all Muslims are salafists by default, given the central importance of the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community for believers. During the mid-20th century, however, Salafism moved in a more conservative direction and gradually became infused with Wahhabism in part because of the methodological similarity between these two currents of thought. Today the two are synonymous terms. The core characteristics of Salafism include: (1) an emphasis on the purity of the early Muslim community and a rejection of anything that came afterward in Islamic history; (2) an obsession with the problem of *shirk* (polytheism) that has allegedly infused itself into Muslim societies due to rituals and practices that are innovations (*bid' a*) that must be purged. And (3), a sincere belief that the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunnah*) are clear in meaning and possess the answers for every conceivable circumstance.⁶²

The second development that guaranteed the survival of Wahhabism was its embrace by Muhammad Ibn Saud, a local tribal chief who lived in the late 18th century. This produced a religious-political movement that gradually subdued the other tribes of the Arabian peninsula and formed the foundations of the social contract that shaped the modern state of Saudi Arabia.⁶³ The House of Saud supplied the military muscle, while Wahhabism provided the underlying ideology. In areas where they expanded during the 19th and 20th century, the Wahhabis would engage in extreme acts of brutality that shocked other Muslims. Public floggings for crimes such as listening to music, shaving their beards, wearing silk or gold (for men), smoking, playing chess, backgammon or cards or failing to uphold strict rules of gender segregation were common. All shrines

and most historical monuments in Arabia were also destroyed.⁶⁴ These practices, justified in the name of a literalist reading of Islam, would have been limited to the Arabian peninsula had it not been for another critical development—the discovery of oil.

The marriage of Saudi petrodollars to Wahhabi Islam gave this specific ideological orientation a global reach. Muslim societies around the world were affected through the financing of mosques, the dissemination of Wahhabist literature, and the provision of generous scholarships for the training of imams in Saudi Arabia. Billions of dollars were poured into this endeavor. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, more funds were invested to undermine Iran's revolutionary appeal. The Wikileaks documents "indicate an extensive apparatus inside the Saudi government dedicated to missionary activity that brings in officials from the Foreign, Interior and Islamic Affairs Ministries, the intelligence service and the office of the king." Projects that have been funded include "putting foreign preachers on the Saudi payroll, building mosques, schools and study centers, and undermining foreign officials and news media deemed threatening to the kingdom's agenda."⁶⁵

The consequences of these policies left their mark on Muslim societies. As Saudi Arabia emerged as a major regional power and oil exporter backed by Western powers, the pluralism and relative tolerance that once existed in Muslim societies were gradually undermined as Saudi funding extended Wahhabi influences across the Muslim world. Existing tensions related to problems of development, modernity and identity were exacerbated. A rise in sectarianism was one result of these policies.

Arguably, the most toxic effect of Wahhabism has been the mainstreaming of a puritanical interpretation of Islam masquerading as normative Islam by hijacking the symbols of Islamic authenticity and legitimacy. Commenting on the global spread of Wahhabism, Khaled Abou El Fadl observes: "today nearly all of the issues and problematics that interested and pre-occupied Wahhabi theology and thought have been injected into the Muslim mainstream, and in fact, have come to permeate Muslim social interactions and debates. What were at one time considered imprudent fixations upon minutiae marginal to the faith by an intemperate group of Bedouins now [have] become at the center of Muslim debates."⁶⁶

The radicalization of Muslim youth today and the use of violence in the name of religion also have direct Wahhabi links. Several of the most dramatic acts of terrorism in the West in recent years illustrate this point. Consider the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing. The perpetrators of this crime were Tamerlane and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, young men from the Dagestan/Chechnya region of the northern Caucasus. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, religion was freed from state control and a new Salafist-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, backed by Saudi Arabia, moved in to fill the void. On a trip back to Dagestan in early 2012, Tamerlane Tsarnaev was reportedly radicalized. Among his favorite videos on Youtube, for example, was one that denounced Dagestan's traditional Sufi interpretation of Islam in favor of the more hardline salafist interpretation that had arrived on the scene.⁶⁷

The 2015 Paris attacks also have drawn attention to the problem of radicalization in Muslim immigrant communities. Belgium has featured prominently in this story and according to an investigation by *The Independent*, some “of the answers may lie in the implanting of Saudi Salafist preachers in the country from the 1960s.”⁶⁸

In 1967, keen to secure oil contracts, the Belgian government hosted the King of Saudi Arabia. Part of the expansion of relations included the establishment of mosques and the hiring of Gulf-trained clerics. This coincided with the arrival of North African and Turkish workers whose main places of worship were these Saudi-supported mosques. “The Moroccan community... comes from the Maliki school of Islam, and are a lot more tolerant and open than the Muslims from other regions like Saudi Arabia,” noted George Dallemagne, a Belgian member of parliament. “However, many of them were re-Islamified by the Salafist clerics and teachers...Some Moroccans were even given scholarships to study in Medina, in Saudi Arabia.”

Mr. Dallemagne says these Salafist clerics have been a huge obstacle to the integration of Moroccan immigrants. “We like to think Saudi Arabia is an ally and friend, but the Saudis are always engaged in double-talk: they want an alliance with the West when it comes to fighting Shias in Iran, but nonetheless have a conquering ideology when it comes to their religion in the rest of the world,” he said. A Wikileaks document confirmed this story. It “revealed that a staff member of the Saudi embassy in Belgium was expelled years ago over his active role in spreading the extreme so-called Takfiri dogma. The cable—between the Saudi King and his Home Minister—referred to Belgian demands that the ... Saudi director, Khalid Alabri, should leave the country, saying that his messages were far too extreme.”⁶⁹

ISIS and Saudi Arabia Compared

In the summer of 2014, ISIS caught the attention of the world as they captured the city of Mosul. Soon afterward, the public beheadings of five foreign hostages took place in quick succession and were broadcast on social media. The story dominated headlines for weeks. Unbeknownst to most people, however, was that during the same period in Saudi Arabia, nineteen people were beheaded.⁷⁰ No Western government issued a protest. According to Amnesty International, this was part of a trend in Saudi executions that had reached a 20-year high by the end of 2015. Saudi Arabia began the year 2016 with a mass execution of 47 prisoners, including a prominent Shia cleric, drawing further rebuke from human rights groups.⁷¹ The behavioral similarities between the Saudi Arabia and ISIS run deep.

On December 16, 2014, ISIS issued a communiqué listing punishments that would now be enforced in Islamic State territory. It justified these punishments by invoking a traditional interpretation of *hudud* provisions stipulated in Islamic law. The crimes and punishment list included: treason (death), homosexuality (death), theft (amputation of hand), adultery (death by stoning), murder, treason and blasphemy (death), and so on.⁷² This is nearly identical to the crime and punishment provisions routinely implemented in Saudi Arabia.⁷³

When ISIS needed textbooks for its school curricula, it downloaded books from the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabi texts were a perfect ideological match for its theology given the shared salafist theological bases between the two political entities. A study that followed Saudi twitter conversations on the topic reported statements that confirmed that this symmetry was “normal” because as one person noted “all our life we have lived with [ISIS] and its thoughts, its schools and its curriculum.” Adil al-Kalbani, a Wahhabi cleric, who had led prayers as an Imam at the Holy Shrine in Mecca, stated that “[ISIS] is a Salafi [fundamentalist] offshoot ... a reality we should confront with transparency.” Commenting on this admission, Abu Hamza al-Masa’ary added that ISIS is the fruit of “the tree of Wah[h]abi preaching.”⁷⁴

Notwithstanding these shared theological underpinnings, there is a critical difference that sets ISIS apart from Saudi Arabia. The salafist strain of Wahhabism preached in Saudi Arabia promotes obedience to the monarchy while the ISIS’ version rejects this notion and seeks to topple existing political regimes and replace them with a Caliphate. This poses a deep political dilemma for the future of Saudi Arabia. The House of Saud “now has a foe that is so close to its own religious interpretation of Islam, that Saudi Arabia cannot be seen to be fighting ISIS very strongly because it would undermine its authority at home.”⁷⁵

Proof of this ISIS-Saudi connection has been produced in a Brookings Institution study. Based on a sample size of 20,000, the report concluded that ISIS supporters on twitter disproportionately come from Saudi Arabia.⁷⁶ Saudi Arabia also tops the list of foreign fighters who have joined this organization, and Saudi fighters have undertaken many of the suicide operations in ISIS-controlled territory as well.⁷⁷

In summary, reflecting on the impact of Wahhabism on Muslim societies today, Khaled Abou El Fadl concludes that because of its “puritanical and idealized, and thoroughly mythologized, view of the past, the Wahhabi orientation cannot reconcile between its understanding of this idealized view of the past and the complexity and diversity of cultures” that constitute our modern world. The final result is that “Wahhabi influence has added a dimension of oppressiveness and vehemence to contemporary Muslim life that frequently borders on the morbid.”⁷⁸

Karen Armstrong reaches a similar conclusion. She notes that a “whole generation of Muslims, therefore, [have] grown up with a maverick form of Islam that has given them a negative view of other faiths and an intolerantly sectarian understanding of their own. While not extremist per se, this is an outlook in which radicalism can develop.”⁷⁹ And it has. If you are a young Muslim in Karachi, Cairo, Toronto or London today, keen on connecting with your religious heritage, the likelihood of exposure to a Wahhabi-influenced version of Islam is high. Conversely, the possibility of exposure to an ethical and humanistic interpretation of Islam, a form that dominated most of Islamic history allowing it to expand and attract new followers, is low. Part of the challenge of combating ISIS is to reverse this equation.

Conclusion

The ISIS Crisis is a manifestation of the broken politics of the Middle East. These broken politics are a direct result of an ongoing series of human rights crises and democracy-deficits that have plagued the region for decades. These social and political conditions have contributed to the rise and expansion of radical Islamist insurgencies, of which ISIS is the most recent iteration.

In this context, Iraq and Syria are unique. Among the 22 members of the Arab League, these two countries have been most adversely affected by the consequences that flow from political despotism, war and state collapse. It is precisely for these reasons that ISIS was able to set up its Islamic State in this specific part of the Islamic world and not others.

The war in Syria, now into its sixth year, has been a key contributing factor in the rise of ISIS. Without a resolution of the war, it is difficult to envision an end to the ISIS crisis. Thus, all roads lead to Damascus. ISIS was reconstituted in the context of the horrors of the Syrian war, and its ultimate fate will be determined in Syria.

But ISIS also has intellectual and theological roots that can be traced back to a specific part of the Arab-Islamic world – the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The cultivation of a specific puritanical interpretation of Sunni Islam, known as Wahhabism, by the Saudi state is core feature of the ISIS crisis that is often ignored. We are witnessing today the consequences of the promulgation and mainstreaming of Wahhabi Islam on a global scale. Masquerading as normative Islam, this ultraconservative interpretation of religion has produced an ethical crisis in Muslim societies that has been exacerbated by the Middle East's broken politics. Exposure to more humanistic interpretations of Islam could have limited ISIS' reach. Young Muslims frustrated by the dire social conditions of their societies have channeled their anger and frustration into Wahhabi Islam, which claims to provide utopian solutions to the problems of the modern world. Rising Islamophobia in the West and the double standards of Western foreign policy, particularly with regard to the Israel-Palestine conflict, has allowed religious extremism to flourish.

The crisis now facing in the Arab-Islamic world was to be expected. Sixteen years ago, a series of UN Arab Human Development Reports, written by a team of leading Arab social scientists, forecast and predicted the deep crisis facing the region while hinting at a coming political explosion.

The *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations* observed that the Arab world was at a crossroads. "The region is hampered by three key deficits that can be considered defining features: the freedom deficit; the women's empowerment deficit [and] the human capabilities/knowledge deficit relative to income." Compared with the rest of the world, "the Arab Countries had the lowest freedom score in the 1990s' and when measured by indicators such as political process, civil liberties, political rights and a free media 'the Arab region ... [had] the

lowest value of all regions of the world for voice and accountability.”⁸⁰ In terms of the status of women, ‘applying the UNDP gender empowerment measure (GEM) to Arab countries [revealed] that the latter suffer[ed] a glaring deficit in women’s empowerment. Among the regions of the world, the Arab region ranks next to last as measured by GEM; only sub-Saharan Africa has a lower score.’⁸¹

The *Arab Human Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World*, focused on the themes of good governance, political reform, and civil liberties. It concluded that political and civil rights, popular participation, representative institutions, the political accountability of leadership, the rule of law, the equal treatment of citizens and the existence of an independent judiciary, were all in short supply. As a result, the “Arab development crisis has widened, deepened and grown more complex.”⁸² Its main beneficiary has been religious extremism.

One day ISIS might be defeated militarily. But as long as the social conditions that gave rise to ISIS remain in place, future instability and violence can be expected. As the journalist and public intellectual Rami Khouri has presciently observed: “There is only one antidote in the long run to eliminating the Islamic State and all it represents. That is to stop pursuing the abusive and criminal policies that have demeaned millions of decent Arab men and women and shaped Arab countries for the past half a century. Bombing Iraq and Syria will gain some time and probably must happen in combination with serious military action by local Arab and Kurdish forces. However, if the ways of the corrupt modern Arab security state is not radically reversed, the mass desperation and hysteria that the Islamic State represents will only re-emerge again in more extreme forms, in the years to come.”⁸³

Notes

¹ For a succinct background see Charles Lister, *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2015), William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015) and Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

² Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) and Majid Khadurri and Edmund Ghareeb, *War in the Gulf, 1990-1991: The Iraq-Kuwait Conflict and its Implications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³ Yezid Sayigh (2014) "Are the Sykes-Picot Borders Being Redrawn?" *Carnegie Middle East Center*, June 26, 2014, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=56007>.

⁴ CNN Documentary, *The Long Road to Hell: America in Iraq*, October 26, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1510/26/csr.01.html>. He also observed that: "Islam never experienced something akin to the Reformation in Europe; the lines between the sacred and the secular are unclear and contested." See Richard Haass, "The Next Thirty Years War," Project Syndicate, July 21, 2014, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/richard-n--haass-argues-that-the-middle-east-is-less-a-problem-to-be-solved-than-a-condition-to-be-managed#YctL2boFJBv61EjZ.99>.

⁵ "Statement by the President on Syria," August 31, 2013 and "Remarks of President Barack Obama – State of the Union Address," January 12, 2016. Both are available at: www.whitehouse.gov.

⁶ Ezi Basaran, "Former CIA officer says US policies helped create IS," *Al Monitor*, September 2, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/turkey-usa-iraq-syria-isis-fuller.html#ixzz3wrjQVDyG>.

⁷ See the annual reports by Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/reports>.

⁸ S.V.R. Nasr, "European Colonialism and the Emergence of Modern Muslim States," in John Esposito ed., *The Oxford History of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 549-600.

⁹ Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble, "Theoretical Perspectives on Arab Liberalization and Democratization," in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble eds, *Political Liberalization & Democratization in the Arab World*, Volume 1 (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995), 3-27; Alfred Stepan and Graeme B. Robertson, "An 'Arab' More Than a 'Muslim' Democracy Gap," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (2003), 30-44; Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36 (January 2004), 139-157; Larry Diamond, "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?" *Journal of Democracy* 21 (January 2010), 93-104.

¹⁰ Eqbal Ahmad, "The Neofascist State: Notes on the Pathology of Power in the Third World," 142 in Carollee Bengelsdorf, Margaret Cerullo, and Yogesh Chandrani eds., *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 142.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹² *Ibid.*, 146.

¹³ Libya under Qaddafi and Tunisia under Ben Ali would also fit this description. For more on the general theme of authoritarian regimes in the Arab World, see Roger

Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, 3rd edition (New York: Routledge, 2004), 22-78.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurd*, July 1993, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/ANFALINT.htm>.

¹⁵ Statement by Max van der Stoel, Special Rapporteur for the United Nations on Iraq before the U.N. Human Rights Commission on March 2, 1993. Cited by Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, updated edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), xiii. Also see Kevin M. Woods, David D. Palkki and Mark E. Stout eds., *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant's Regime 1978-2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Aaron Faust, *The Ba'athification of Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Totalitarianism* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Nihad Sirees, *The Silence and the Roar*, translated by Max Weiss (New York: Other Press, 2013), 32, 53.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Syria's Tadmor Prison*, April 1, 1996, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/04/01/syrias-tadmor-prison>. For background see Michel Seurat, *Syrie: l'État de Barbarie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books, 2003) and Yassin al Haj Saleh, *Récrits d'une Syrie Oubliée: Sortir la mémoire des prisons* (Paris: Les Prairies Ordinaires, 2015).

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, *If the Dead Could Speak: Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facilities*, December 16, 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/04/01/syrias-tadmor-prison> and Amnesty International, "Between Prison and the Grave: Enforced Disappearance in Syria," November 5, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2579/2015/en/>.

¹⁹ Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 121-185 and Sonja Zmerli and Ken Newton, "Social Trust and Attitudes Toward Democracy," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 72 (Winter, 2008), 706-724.

²⁰ On the nature of the Arab state and its fundamental weakness, see Nazih Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 447-459.

²¹ Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, trans. Nicholas Elliott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 569, 573; Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and Iraq Sanction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 86-102 and John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 192-267.

²² United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq*, 1 May-31 October 2015, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMIRreport1May31October2015.pdf>.

²³ Griff Witte, "New U.N. report says world's refugee crisis is worse than anyone suspected," *Washington Post*, June 18, 2015.

²⁴ *Failing Syria: Assessing the Impact of UN Security Council Resolutions in Protecting and Assisting Civilians in Syria* (2015), https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp-failing-syria-unsc-resolution-120315-en1.pdf and United National Development Report, *Alienation and*

Violence: Impact of Syria Crisis Report 2014 (UNDP/Syria Center for Policy Research, March 2015), http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/alienation_and_violence_impact_of_the_syria_crisis_in_2014_eng.pdf.

²⁵ United National Development Report, *Alienation and Violence: Impact of Syria Crisis Report 2014* (UNDP/Syria Center for Policy Research, March 2015), 6 and Strategic Needs Analysis Project, *Regional Analysis: Syria*, <http://www.acaps.org/img/reports/p-regional-analysis-for-syria---part-a-overview-and-sectoral-analysis-oct-dec-2014.pdf>.

²⁶ Rick Gladstone, "U.N. Refugee Official Calls Situation in Syria and Iraq 'Unsustainable'," *New York Times*, April 24, 2015 and Internal Displacement Monitor, *Global Overview 2015*, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/global-overview>.

²⁷ Hasan Abu Hanieh and Mohammad Abu Rumman, *The "Islamic State" Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle for Global Jihadism* (Amman: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015), 164; Sarah Leah Whitson, "Why ISIS is Winning," February 18, 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/18/why-fight-against-isis-failing>; William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 125. For background see Fanar Haddad, "Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 7, 2016.

²⁸ Ann Barnard and Tim Arango, "Using Violence and Persuasion, ISIS Makes Political Gains," *New York Times*, June 3, 2015.

²⁹ Liz Sly, "Petraeus: The Islamic State isn't our biggest problem in Iraq," *Washington Post*, March 20, 2015.

³⁰ This point has been belatedly acknowledged by President Obama, "Goal is to shrink Islamic State operations: Obama," *Reuters*, November 15, 2015.

³¹ The Editors, "On ISIS," *Middle East Report*, no. 276 (Fall 2015), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer276/isis>.

³² William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of The Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 42-45 and Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming, 2016), chapters two and three. Attacks on civilians were at their lowest levels during this time period.

³³ Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Books, 2016), 35-76; Samer Abboud, *Syria* (London: Polity Books, 2015), 48-82 and Paolo Gabriel Hilo Pinto, "Syria," in Paul Amar and Vijay Prashad eds., *Dispatches from the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 204-242.

³⁴ William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of The Islamic State*, 85-86 and Peter Neumann, "Suspects into Collaborators," *London Review of Books*, April 3, 2014, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n07/peter-neumann/suspects-into-collaborators>.

³⁵ These reports, covering the first three years, can be found here: <http://www.du.edu/korbel/middleeast/syria.html>.

³⁶ Syria Network for Human Rights, "The Main Conflict Parties Who are Killing Civilians in Syria: Civilian Death Toll up to End of October 2015," November 19, 2015, http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Who_Are_Killing_Civilians_in_Syria_en.pdf.

³⁷ UN Secretary-General, "Statement on Syria," March 12, 2014, <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/?nid=7520>.

³⁸ On Syria's under reported Rape Crisis see Lauren Wolfe, "Syria Has a Massive Rape Crisis," *The Atlantic*, April 3, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/syria-has-a-massive-rape-crisis/274583/>.

³⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, "Secretary of Defense Testimony: "Statement on Iraq, Syria, and ISIL Before the Senate Armed Services Committee," September 16, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/605607/statement-on-iraq-syria-and-isil-before-the-senate-armed-services-committee>.

⁴⁰ John Mearsheimer, "America Unhinged," *The National Interest*, no. 129 (January-February 2014), 10.

⁴¹ Interview on Radio Open Source with Christopher Lydon, February 28, 2014. For a more detailed critique of realism and Syria see Roger Cohen, "The Limits of American Realism," *New York Times*, January 11, 2016 and Muhammad Idrees Ahmad, "Syria and Surrealism," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 22, 2015.

⁴² Mark Lander, "Rice Offers a More Modest Strategy for Mideast," *New York Times*, October 26, 2013 and Marc Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role," *Foreign Affairs* 94 (September/October 2015), 18-27.

⁴³ Rania Abouzeid, "The Jihad Next Door: The Syrian Roots of Iraq's newest civil war," *Politico Magazine*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214.html#.VPp15fnF9qV>.

⁴⁴ Nick Cumming-Bruce, "U.N. Investigators Cite Atrocities in Syria," *New York Times*, September 16, 2014.

⁴⁵ This draws upon a long tradition going back to the Enlightenment where thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Paine and Alexis de Tocqueville that have advanced variations of this argument. According to George Kateb, the goal of Rousseau's democratic project is justice. "Rousseau's Political Thought," *Political Science Quarterly* 76 (December 1964), 519-43.

⁴⁶ Nelly Lahoud with Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, *Jihadi Discourse in the Wake of the Arab Spring* (Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, 2013).

⁴⁷ Cited by Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (August 2005), 390-391.

⁴⁸ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 177-183 and Guido Steinberg, *Leading the Counter-Revolution: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring* (Berlin: SWP Research Paper, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, June 2014).

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Establish International Inquiry into Rab'a Massacre," August 14, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/14/egypt-establish-international-inquiry-raba-massacre> and "Egypt: Rab'a Killings Likely Crimes against Humanity," August 12, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/12/egypt-raba-killings-likely-crimes-against-humanity>.

⁵⁰ Robert Kagan and Michelle Dunne, "Obama embraces the Nixon Doctrine in Egypt," *Washington Post*, April 3, 2015; Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Human Rights in Sharp

Decline,” January 29, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/29/egypt-human-rights-sharp-decline>; Amnesty International, “Death Sentences and Executions 2014,” March 31, 2015, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/death-sentences-and-executions-2014>.

⁵¹ Marc Lynch, “The endless recurrence of the clash of civilizations,” *The Monkey Cage* (*Washington Post* blog) November 20, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/11/20/the-endless-recurrence-of-the-clash-of-civilizations/>.

⁵² Borzou Daragahi, “The Arab Idealist who dies for ISIS,” *Financial Times*, December 2, 2014; Emad Shahin, “Four Traits, Sisi, Hitler and Mussolini Have in Common,” *Middle East Eye*, June 6, 2015, <http://emadshahin.com/?p=1916>.

⁵³ David Kirkpatrick, “U.S. Citizen, Once Held in Egypt’s Crackdown, Becomes Voices for Inmates,” *New York Times*, August 28, 2015.

⁵⁴ Samira Shackle, “Mohammad Soltan, the Egyptian activist who spent 400 days on hunger strike in prison,” *The New Statesman*, October 28, 2015, <http://www.newstatesman.com/world/middle-east/2015/10/mohamed-soltan-egyptian-activist-who-spent-400-days-hunger-strike-prison> and Murtaza Hussain, “ISIS Recruitment Thrives in Brutal Prisons Run by U.S.-backed Egypt,” *The Intercept*, November 24, 2015, <https://theintercept.com/2015/11/24/isis-recruitment-thrives-in-brutal-prisons-run-by-u-s-backed-egypt/>.

⁵⁵ Fareed Zakaria, “From Tunisia, a voice of hope from the Muslim world,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2015. Also see Rached Ghannouchi, “Fight ISIS with Democracy,” *The Atlantic*, February 1, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/02/tunisia-democracy-ennahdha-isis/458703/>.

⁵⁶ John F. Kennedy, “Address on the First Anniversary of the Alliance for Progress,” March 13, 1962.

⁵⁷ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shariah in the Modern World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 115.

⁵⁸ Michael Crawford, *Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2014), 47-71 and Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 227-251.

⁵⁹ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 229.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁶¹ Muhammad Masud, Armando Salvatore, Martin van Bruinessen eds., *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

⁶² Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* in Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009), 38-39; Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 251-270.

⁶³ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13-68 and Ben Hubbard, “Saudis Turn Birthplace of Wahhabism Ideology into Tourist Spot,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2015.

⁶⁴ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 237.

⁶⁵ Ben Hubbard and Mayy El Sheikh, “Wikileaks Shows Saudi Obsession with Iran,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2015. Also see David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 158-178.

⁶⁶ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 243.

⁶⁷ Masha Gessen, *The Brothers: The Road to An American Tragedy* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015), 48-50 and her interview on National Public Radio, "Tracing the Roots of 'The Brothers' and the Roots of the Boston Marathon Bombing," April 7, 2015. Also see Alissa de Carbonnel and Stephanie Simon, "Special Report: The radicalization of Tamerlane Tsarnaev," *Reuters*, April 23, 2013.

⁶⁸ Leo Cendrowicz, "Paris attacks: How the influence of Saudi Arabia sowed the seeds of radicalism in Belgium," *The Independent*, November 23, 2015.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Also see Odile Leherte, "Dossier Alabri: la Belgique a fait pression sur l'Arabie Saoudite," August 12, 2015, http://www.rtf.be/info/societe/detail_mosquee-du-cinquantenaire-la-belgique-a-fait-pression-sur-l-arabie-saoudite?id=9052178.

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Surge in Executions," August 21, 2014.

⁷¹ "Executions in Saudi Arabia at a 20-year high, says Amnesty International," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2015 and Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Mass Execution Largest since 1980," January 4, 2016.

⁷² A translation of the document can be found here:

<https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/12/16/an-official-islamic-state-statement-on-shari-punishments/>.

⁷³ Rori Donaghy and Mary Atkinson, "Crime and Punishment: The Islamic State vs Saudi Arabia," January 20, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/crime-and-punishment-islamic-state-vs-saudi-arabia-1588245666>.

⁷⁴ Patrick Cockburn, "Isis militants: Twitter provides one of the few forums in which Saudis can discuss what they really feel - and it says they blame the clergy for Isis," *The Independent*, October 4, 2014 and Karen Armstrong, "Wahhabism to ISIS: how Saudi Arabia exported the main source of global terrorism," *New Statesman*, November 27, 2014. Also see Madawi Al-Rasheed, "The Shared History of Saudi Arabia and ISIS," November 28, 2014, <http://www.hurstpublishers.com/the-shared-history-of-saudi-arabia-and-isis/>.

⁷⁵ Toby Matthiesen, "The West's Alliance with Saudi Arabia Fuels Islamism," *New York Times*, December 8, 2015 and William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 151.

⁷⁶ J.M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter consensus: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on twitter," Brookings Institution, March 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan>.

⁷⁷ "Saudis most likely to join ISIS, 10% of group's fighters are women," *Middle East Monitor*, October 20, 2014 and Munira Ahudab, "Saudis carried out 60% of suicide attacks for ISIS in Iraq," *Al Hayat*, October 16, 2014.

⁷⁸ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 217.

⁷⁹ Karen Armstrong, "Wahhabism to ISIS: how Saudi Arabia exported the main source of global terrorism," *New Statesman*, November 27, 2014.

⁸⁰ United Nations Development Program, *Arab Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 2002), 27.

⁸¹ Ibid., 28.

⁸² United Nations Development Program, *Arab Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 2004), 5.

⁸³ Rami Khouri, "Antidote to the Islamic State Threat," August 27, 2014, <http://www.agenceglobal.com/index.php?show=article&Tid=2763>.