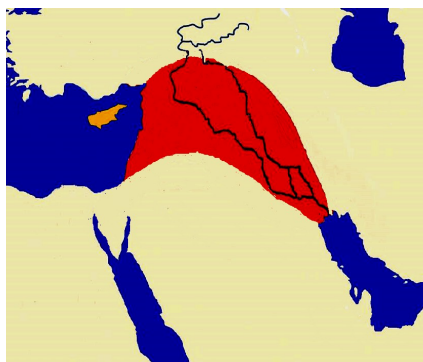


The Bleeding Crescent



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Abstract

During the last two years, the Fertile Crescent witnessed the emergence of a very extreme and powerful Islamic group which relied on terrorist actions to achieve its ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate in the Middle East. This group is called 'the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' (ISIS), and it broke away from 'al-Qaeda Network in Mesopotamia'.

By June 2014, ISIS succeeded in putting its control over a territory, in both Iraq and Syria, equal to that of the United Kingdom. A severe Islamic law has been applied to the inhabitants of the territories seized by ISIS. Furthermore, the group is intending to expand its control to wherever it can do. Hence, it imposes a serious threat to the entire region.

This research aims at examining and explaining the factors which contributed to the emergence of this dangerous group.

In accordance with the 'Theory of Regional Complex' (TRC), the research deals with the factors and actors responsible for the conflict in the Fertile Crescent on four levels; domestic, sub-regional, regional and global. In order to achieve a comprehensive analysis of the conflict, the research focuses on the economic and societal factors in addition to the political ones which deepen the conflict.

It is concluded that the ethnic divisions of the region's societies, the authoritarian characteristics of the Syrian political regime and the ethnically divided government in Iraq are the most important factors behind the birth and success of ISIS on the domestic level. The struggle for political power and economic interests are the most influential factors for the strength and expansion of this group on the regional and global levels.

ملخص البحث

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لقد شهدت الستتان الماضيتان ظهور واحدة من أشد المنظمات الإسلامية المتطرفة وأقواها. وحملت تلك المنظمة التي انشقت عن "تنظيم القاعدة في بلاد الرافدين" اسم "الدولة الإسلامية في العراق وبلاد الشام"، ولم تتوان عن اتباع العمليات الإرهابية سبيلا لتحقيق أهدافها.

وفي حزيران من عام 2014 نجحت المنظمة في بسط سيطرتها على مساحات من منطقة الهلال الخصيب تعادل مساحة المملكة المتحدة وسعت الى فرض نموذجا متطرفا للشريعة الإسلامية على سكان المناطق التي احتلتها. ولم تخف المنظمة نواياها في التوسع والامتداد الى اقصى ما تستطيع، الأمر الذي يُعد تهديدا للمنطقة بأسرها.

يهدف هذا البحث الى دراسة وتحليل العوامل التي أدت الى ظهور هذه المنظمة الخطرة. وبالاعتماد على نظرية "الامن الإقليمي" يحدد البحث أربعة مستويات للتحليل هي الداخلي والمناطقي والإقليمي إضافة الى المستوى العالمي. ويركز البحث على الجوانب الاقتصادية والاجتماعية إضافة الى الجانب السياسي.

ويستنتج البحث ان الانقسامات الاثنية في مجتمعات الهلال الخصيب وطبيعة الأنظمة الحاكمة ساهمت بشكل أساس في توفير بيئة ملائمة لظهور وتنامي تنظيم "الدولة الإسلامية" على المستوى الداخلي. هذا في حين لعب الاصطفاف المذهبي والايديولوجي دورا حاسما في جعل التنظيم مصدر تهديدي حقيقي لأمن المنطقة بأسرها. أما الصراع على مناطق للنفوذ السياسي والمصالح الاقتصادية فله هو الآخر دورا رئيسا في تقوية وتوسع التنظيم على المستوى العالمي.

Introduction

According to 'Ancient History Encyclopedia', The Fertile Crescent is the region in the Middle East which curves, like a quarter-moon shape, from the Persian Gulf, through modern-day southern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and northern Egypt. The term was first coined in 1916 by the Egyptologist James Henry Breasted in his work 'Ancient Times: A History of the Early World', where he wrote: "This fertile crescent is approximately a semi-circle, with the open side toward the south, having the west end at the south-east corner of the Mediterranean, the centre directly north of Arabia, and the east end at the north end of the Persian Gulf." His phrase was widely circulated through the publications of the day becoming, finally, the common designation for this region. The Fertile Crescent is traditionally associated (in Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths) with the earthly location of the *Garden of Eden*.

Known as the *Cradle of Civilization*, the Fertile Crescent is regarded as the birthplace of agriculture, urbanization, writing, trade, science, history and organized religion and was first populated c.10,000 BCE when agriculture and the domestication of animals began in the region.

Today, the *Fertile Crescent* is turning into a bloody one, the *Garden of Eden* is turning into a hell, and the *Cradle of Civilization* is turning into a cradle of backwardness.

This region has witnessed many bloody conflicts but the current one is probably the bloodiest. Thus, thousands of innocent people have been killed. Thousands of young girls and women have been raped or sold. Many cities turned into ruins. Millions of people preferred to leave their countries and seek asylum in countries where no one is killed because of his race, religion or sect.

The current conflict of the Fertile Crescent begun with the emergence of the so-called 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' (ISIS) in 2013. This group broke away from al-Qaeda organizations in both Iraq and Syria.

Unlike al-Qaeda which almost prefers to wage guerilla wars and carry out terrorist attacks against what it views as enemies, ISIS prefers to establish governmental institutions on the territories it seizes and expands these territories as much as it is possible using every means possible, especially terrorism.

A few days after seizing the Iraqi city of Mosul in June 2014, ISIS declared an Islamic Caliphate, the form of government adopted by the Prophet Muhammad's successors during the age of Muslim expansion, headed by a young caliph called Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Today, ISIS is controlling large territories in Iraq, Syria and Libya. A very severe Islamic laws are applied to the inhabitants of the territories on which ISIS puts control.

An American-led coalition of around sixty countries from all over the world is attempting to put an end to the atrocities of this group but still no substantial result. Another coalition led by Russia and included Syria, Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah has been formed since September 2015 to fight ISIS. Although this coalition seems more serious than the first one, ISIS is still strong and threatening the security of the region.

Problem formulation

This research attempts to answer the following questions:

What are the domestic, regional and global factors which led to the birth and strength of ISIS?

How does ISIS influence the security and stability of the region?

In order not to exceed the boundary of this research, the main focus will be on Iraq and Syria despite the fact that the Fertile Crescent includes other countries. Further, the research will not deal with all of the regional and global powers that affect the politics of the region but only those which play an essential roles in the conflict.

Methodology

As argued by Anol Bhattacharjee, scientific inquiry may take one of two possible forms: inductive or deductive. While in inductive research, the goal of a researcher is to infer theoretical concepts and patterns from observed data, in deductive research, the goal of the researcher is to test concepts and patterns known from theory using new empirical data (Bhattacharjee, 2012: 13). In other words, while 'inductive research' aims at building a theory on the basis of empirical observations, 'deductive research' aims at explaining empirical observations on the basis of an already built theory.

Deductive reasoning works from the more general to the more specific. That is why it sometimes called a 'top-down' approach. The deductive researcher usually begins with choosing a theory about the problem. Then it goes down into

more specific hypotheses that can be tested. It goes narrow down even further when observations are collected to address the hypotheses. This process ultimately leads to test the hypotheses with specific data and determine whether one can accept or deny the formed hypotheses. Finally, testing hypotheses against empirical observation can also examine the ability of the chosen theory to explain the topic of the research.

In accordance with this argumentation, I use a deductive method in this research which attempts to explain the factors responsible for the recent conflicts of the Fertile Crescent.

The research relies on the 'Theory of Regional Security Complex' to achieve its goal. On the basis of this theory, I will assume that the factors responsible for the recent bloody conflicts in the Fertile Crescent are spread over four levels; domestic, sub-regional, regional and global.¹ These levels will be examined separately despite the fact that they are strongly related to one another in producing and complicating the conflicts of the Fertile Crescent.

On the domestic level, the research deals with the political, economic and societal factors that make both Iraq and Syria a suitable environment for the birth and strength of extreme religious movements, especially al-Qaeda and its successor (ISIS).

On the sub-regional level, the mutual influences among the Fertile Crescent's states (Iraq, Syria, Israel and Lebanon) are examined.

The influence of Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar is discussed on the regional level. The roles of Saudi Arabia and Qatar is examined in one part because these two state have almost the same attitude to the Fertile Crescent's conflicts.

Finally, the conclusion sums up the effect of all actors and factors producing and contributing to the conflicts.

1. Theory

Political Realism, as a theory, has dominated the international relations' discipline during the Cold War. One key assumption of the realists is that states always seek to maximize their power. The most famous theorists of the realist school in the first half of the twentieth century, Hans Morgenthau, asserts in his main work, '*Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*', that "international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power" (Morgenthau, 1954: 25).

In 1979, Kenneth Waltz published his famous book '*Theory of International Relations*', in which he modified the Realist's theory. According to Waltz, the international system is anarchic; states are the central actors in this system and they always seek to maximize their power and to balance the threat posed to them by other states. Unlike Morgenthau, Waltz believes that power is not an end by itself but a mean to achieve benefits. Moreover, He compares states in the international system to firms in a domestic economy and argues that they have the same fundamental interest: to survive. "Internationally, the environment of

¹ The research deals with the 'Fertile Crescent' as a sub-region of the Middle East.

states' actions, or the structure of their system, is set by the fact that some states prefer survival over other ends obtainable in the short run and act with relative efficiency to achieve that end" (Waltz, 1979: 93).

Waltz (1979: 77) argues that systems are composed of a structure and their interacting units. Accordingly, Waltz Neorealism adopts two levels to analyze international relations; unit- or state level, and system- or global level. Waltz also argue that the distribution of capabilities among the units is the determining factor for the system's character.

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted, among other things, in the emergence of many regional conflicts all over the world.

These conflicts inspired scholars to pay more attention to this new phenomenon. Barry Buzan and Ole Waever were among the scholar who responded to this change. Buzan and Waever argue that a third level of analysis (regional level) is inevitable for achieving comprehensive explanation of regional conflicts.

Neorealism, according to Buzan and Waever, is built around two levels, system and unit, and is principally concerned to define and operationalize the system level. Neorealists either downplay or ignore all levels except the system one, or like Walt (1987) discuss the regional level empirically without considering its theoretical standing or implications (Buzan, 2003: 28).

Furthermore, they suggest a theoretical framework for analyzing regional security called Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). The central idea in RSCT is that, since most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones, security interdependence is normally patterned into regionally based clusters: security complexes (Buzan, 2003: 4).

According to this theory, regional security complex is defined as: "a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another" (Buzan, 2003: 44).

In order to qualify as a Regional Security Complex (RSC), a group of states or other entities must possess a degree of security interdependence sufficient both to establish them as a linked set and to differentiate them from surrounding security regions (Buzan, 2003: 47-48).

The authors of this theory argue that two variables are responsible for the dynamic of the RSC; the distribution of capabilities and the patterns of amity/enmity among the units of the region.

Finally, the theory specifies what to look for at four levels of analysis and how to interrelate these levels. The four levels are:

1. Domestically in the states of the region, particularly their domestically generated vulnerabilities (is the state strong or weak due to stability of the domestic order and correspondence between state and nation (Buzan 1991)? The specific vulnerability of a state defines the kind of security fears it has (Wæver 1989)—and sometimes makes another state or group of states a structural threat even if it or they have no hostile intentions).
2. State-to-state relations (which generate the region as such).
3. The region's interaction with neighbouring regions (this is supposed to be relatively limited given that the complex is defined by interaction internally

being more important. But if major changes in the patterns of security interdependence that define complexes are underway, this level can become significant, and in situations of gross asymmetries a complex without global powers that neighbours one with a global power can have strong interregional links in one direction).

4. The role of global powers in the region (the interplay between the global and regional security structures) (Buzan, 2003: 51).

There are many reasons for why I chose this theory to analysis the bloody conflicts in the Fertile Crescent. First, at all, the security of each state in this sub-region is strongly links to the security of the neighbouring states. Second, the regional great powers play a significant role in the order and disorder of the sub-region. Third, the sub-region has always been a subject for global interventions in its conflicts. Fourth, patterns of amity/enmity and armament characterize the politics of the sub-region.

On the basis of this theory and its levels of analysis, I will explain the birth, strength and eventual death of ISIS.

2. The Domestic Level

Barry Buzan (1991) argues that three elements are inevitable for the creation and existence of state. These elements are; the idea of the state, the physical base of the state, and the institutions of the state.

According to Buzan, in order to understand the state as a referent object of security it is clearly necessary to understand the links between nation and state. He defines 4 models of nation-states: 1) *nation-state*, where the nation precedes the state, and plays a major role in giving rise to it, 2) *state-nation*, where the state plays an instrumental role in creating the nation, 3) *part nation-state*, where a nation is divided up among two or more states, and 4) *multination-state*, where two or more substantially complete nations are within the boundary of one state. The last model can be divided into two sub-models: *federative state*, which contains two or more nations without trying to impose an artificial state-nation over them, and *imperial state*, in which one nation dominates the state structures to its own advantage.

2. *The institutions of the state*: the entire machinery of government, including its executive, legislative, administrative and judicial bodies, and the laws, procedures and norms by which they operate.

3. *The physical base of the state*: state's population and territory, including all of the natural resources and man-made wealth contained with its borders.

On the basis of these elements Buzan evaluates the stability of the national security, and the strength of the state as a security object. Applying this model on Iraq and Syria will contribute to clarify many sides of the bloody conflicts caused by ISIS in the sub-region.

2.1 Iraq

As for Iraq, since hundreds of years ago, many ethnic groups have been sharing its territory. Today, Iraq's population is divided into three main groups; (Arab 75%-80%, Kurds 15%-20%, Turkomans, Assyrians, and other 5%). Religiously, the Iraqi population is divided as follow: Muslims 99% from which Shia' 60%-

65%, Sunni 32%-37%, Christian 0.8%, Hindu <.1, Buddhist <.1, Jewish <.1, folk religion <.1, unaffiliated .1, other <.1).² These ethnic and religious divisions came to play a significant role in the Iraqi politics after the American invasion of Iraq and the collapse of the Saddam Hussein's regime in April, 2003. Or, as Andrew Terrill put it, when the U.S.-led military forces took control of Iraq in early 2003, they assumed control of a country with a short but extremely complex religious, ethnic, and social history (Terrill, 2004: 1).

While the vast majority of the Shiites and the Kurds welcomed the removal of Saddam's regime, the vast majority of the Sunnis viewed post-Saddam policies such as de-Ba'athification and disbanding the Iraqi Army as a mechanism to break Sunni political power in Iraq and reduce Sunni Arabs to second class citizens. Many Iraqi Sunnis referred to de-Ba'athification as 'de-Sunnization,' viewing the entire effort as a form of revenge and an effort to bar them from power indefinitely (Hashim, 2006: 144).

In contrast to the Sunnis, the Shiites and the Kurds viewed the American occupation as a salvation after thirty five years of being oppressed and marginalized under the Ba'th totalitarian reign. Yann Richard notes that from 1968, when Baath Party seized power until 1977, among the fifteen members of the Revolutionary Command Council, not one was Shiite, and only five percent of the leaders of Baath Party were Shiites. Starting from that date, those close to Saddam Hussein, mostly Sunnis, from Saddam's hometown Tikrit, took over key posts for themselves. The militarization of the regime further disadvantages the Shiites, who have never attained higher ranks in careers as officers (Richard, 1995 :113).

In his book, '*The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi'as*', Joyce Wiley talked about expelling around 40,000 Fayliya Kurds, the only Kurds who are Shia', to Iran in 1971, and more than 23,000 between 1980 and 1982 (Wiley, 1992: 48, 58).

The oppression of the Kurds was not easier than that of the Shiites. Between 1987-1989, the Kurdish areas were exposed to eight military campaign called Anfal³ under the leadership of Ali Hasan al-Majid, Saddam's cousin. Al-Majid employed a variety of chemical weapons during the Anfal campaign, including mustard gas, a blistering agent and Sarin, a nerve agent known as GB. His penchant for this method of extermination earned him the sobriquet "Chemical Ali," and a fearful reputation for brutality almost matching that of Saddam himself (Kelley, 2008: 22). Accordingly, it was not a surprise that the Shiites and Kurds cooperated with the American occupation while the vast majority of the Sunnis chose to play the role of opposition to that occupation.

Since the collapse of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, The Shiites put their control on the ministry of the interior affairs, national security and many other key posts in the state. The Sunnis who have dominated the state's offices under the reign of Saddam Hussein were not satisfied with the redistribution of political power in accordance to the elections' results. Consequently, many areas inhabited by Sunnis, such as al-Anbar, Tikrit, west Nineveh, and many other cities and

² CIA World Factbook, (July 2015 est.)

³ Anfal is a Quranic term meaning 'spoil'.

villages turned into incubators for the armed groups who declared war against both the American occupation and the Shia' dominated army and security forces. These incubators welcomed thousands of *jihadists* from all around the globe as well as Iraqi extremist groups, and provided them with all what could ease their task of launching attacks against the American troops and the Shia' population. Al-Qaeda Network's branch in Iraq (al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia) has been the leading and most effective terrorist group since the fall of Baghdad in April 2003 until the fall of Mosul in June 2014.

The main goal of 'al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia' was to trigger a full-scale war between the Shiites and the Sunnis. In February 2006, this group was so close to reach its goal when a bomb attack on a divine Shia' shrine in Samarra (125 km. north of Baghdad) unleashed a wave of sectarian violence in which hundreds of people are killed. The violence continued for around three years despite the killing of the leader of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, Abu Mosab al-Zarqawi, in June 2006. A new wave of violence was unleashed in November 2011 as a response to the Shia'-led government's issue of an arrest warrant for vice-president Tariq al-Hashemi, a leading Sunni politician, after accusing him of involving in terrorist attacks against Shia' civilian targets. The Sunni coalition boycotted the parliament and cabinet. A few weeks later, bomb and gun attacks targeted Shia' areas throughout the year, sparking fears of a new sectarian conflict.

The leaders of the self-ruled Kurdistan who had many conflicts with the then federal government, welcomed the Sunni insurgence and provided a safe haven for the Sunni figures wanted by judicial authorities in Baghdad. This new alliance between the Sunnis and the Kurds deepened the crises of the federal government.

The outcome of the parliamentary elections of April 2014 was in the favor of the prime minister, al-Maliki. However, the triumph of al-Maliki turned into failure in forming a coalition government because he met a severe opposition from the Sunnis, Kurds and even some Shia' factions. Exploiting these ethnic divisions and tensions in addition to the weakness of the federal government, ISIS invaded Iraq from the north and succeeded in seizing around one third of the Iraqi territories including Nineveh and Tikrit for less than a week. The allegation of ISIS that it came to save the Sunnis from the Shia' oppression was among the important factors behind its swift victory in the Sunna-dominated provinces. Thus, because of the sectarian tension, which took place after the governmental measures to put down the protests in the Sunni provinces, the vast majority of the Sunnis prefer a Sunni authority, regardless how brutal it is, to a Shia' authority. The leaders of Kurdistan's regional authority found in ISIS invasion of northern Iraq an accelerating factor of the dissolution of the state which, in return, could lead to the creation of an independent Kurdish state. That is why, the Kurdish army '*Peshmerga*' captured Kirkuk, the disputed city between Kurdistan and the Iraqi federal government, simultaneously with ISIS conquest of Mosul. Moreover, the *Peshmerga* attempted to avoid any clashes with ISIS fighters. Karl Vick notes that "not until Aug. 6, when ISIS artillery was arrayed just 30 miles

(48 km) from his capital of Erbil, did Barzani issue the order to fight the terrorists to the last breath.”⁴

In respect to the institutions of the state, Iraq can be regarded as a democratic state in the sense that people elects their representatives through ballots instead of bullets. However, Iraq’s government is among the most corrupt in the [Middle East](#), and is described as a ‘hybrid regime’ between a ‘flawed democracy’ and an ‘authoritarian regime’.⁵ Moreover, since the collapse of Saddam’s regime until the present day, key posts in Iraq are shared on ethnic and religious considerations. That is why, the loyalty of the high rank officials is almost to their ethnic groups than to the state or government. Because of this duality and the high level of corruption, all of the state’s institutions, including the security forces are penetrated by terrorist groups, especially al-Qaeda and ISIS. Accordingly, it was not a big surprise to see tens of thousands of soldiers fleeing their battlefields in front of a few hundreds of ISIS fighters.

Iraq’s geography and the distribution of its population have been, to some degree, a helpful factor for the rise of ISIS. That is, hundreds of kilometers of the state’s northern, western and southern borders are shared with Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. All of these countries have been passageways for foreign terrorists and military equipment toward Iraq. Moreover, most of the cities closed to these borders are inhabited by Sunnis. Accordingly, ISIS could easily find safe incubators for its fighters. Over and above, the rugged areas in northern Iraq and other parts closed to southern Kurdistan provide the terrorist groups with suitable arena for guerilla war.

ISIS also makes a huge use of the natural resources of the areas it captured in northern Iraq. The British newspaper ‘Daily Mail’ wrote that ISIS makes nearly \$1 million a day selling off crude oil from conquered refineries to Kurdish businessmen. The *jihadists*, who now call themselves the Islamic State’s caliphate, are smuggling the resources from Iraqi oilfields into Turkey and Iran where they offer it up for \$25 a barrel, making a huge profit.⁶

Consequently, one may conclude that the ethnic divisions and tensions inside the Iraqi society, the flawed democracy and high level of corruption, and some geographic and demographic factors play a significant role behind the triumph of ISIS in Iraq.

2.2 Syria

Like Iraq, Syria is also a multi-ethnic state. Its population is divided among several ethnic groups; (Arab 90.3%, Kurds, Armenians, and other 9.7%). On the basis of religion, the Syrian population is divided as follows; (Muslim 87% (official; includes Sunni 74% and Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia 13%), Christian (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian) 10%, Druze 3%).⁷

Like Iraq, where the Shia majority dominates the government, the Alawite minority dominates the Syrian regime and politics. However, in both Iraq and

⁴ Karl Vick, ‘Massoud Barzani, The Opportunist’, *Time*, December 10, 2014.

⁵ The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2010

⁶ *Daily Mail*, July 12, 2014.

⁷ *CIA World Factbook*, (July 2015 est.)

Syria, many important key offices are occupied by figures affiliated with different ethnic and religious groups.

Inspired by the so-called Arab Spring, mass peaceful protests started moving in march 2011 in some Syrian cities demanding freedom, democracy and more human rights. When the security forces responded to the protests by bullets, the revolting mass demanded the resignation of the president Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his father Hafiz al-Assad who ruled the country between (1971-2000). By July 2011, [hundreds of thousands were taking to the streets across the country](#). Opposition supporters eventually began to take up arms, first to defend themselves and later to expel security forces from their local areas. Violence escalated and the country descended into civil war as rebel brigades were formed to battle government forces for control of cities, towns and the countryside. Fighting reached the outskirts of the capital Damascus and second city of Aleppo in 2012. By August 2015, around 250,000 people had been killed in the conflict.⁸ In contrast to the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt which succeeded in toppling the totalitarian regimes of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak for a few weeks, the Syrian revolution turned into a sectarian conflict in which many domestic, regional and global actors took part.

On the domestic level, the Syrians are divided into two camps; the regime led by the Baath party which is backed by the Alawite minority, the Christians and the Kurds on the one hand, and al-Nusra Front (al-Qaeda branch in Syria) led by Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani and backed by the Sunni majority and the Turkish minority in the north on the other hand. Free Syrian Army (FSA) is another military group fighting against the regime but not under the flag of al-Nusra. That is because (FSA) does not accept the al-Nusra's plan of establishing an Islamic state in Syria.

Sectarian conflict, after all, can have its own self-reinforcing logic: Alawites are bonding together in part because they fear, not without reason, that they will be slaughtered in Sunni revenge killings if Assad loses. Sunnis see Alawite militias forming and thus perceive all Alawites as their enemies, so they start attacking members of that religious sect, which makes other Alawites more likely to form in-group militias.⁹

In 2012, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi who succeeded Abu Ayyub al-Misri in leading al-Qaeda in Iraq planned to unify his network and al-Nusra Front into one organization called 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' (ISIS). Al-Jawlani refused al-Baghdadi's plan and continued to lead al-Nusra Front as an independent organization. Many armed clashes took place between the two groups despite their ideological approximation. ISIS, due to its organizational skills, foreign support and efficient media, achieved more popularity and strength than al-Nusra Front did and proved that it was the most powerful extreme group in both Iraq and Syria.

⁸ *'Syria: The story of the conflict'*, BBC World News, October 9, 2015

⁹ *'Syria and Lebanon to establish diplomatic relations'*, The Guardian, October 14, 2008

As regard to the institutions of the state, the Syrian regime is a totalitarian one. For more than forty years, Baath party has enjoyed full monopoly over all of the political activities in the state. Political opposition are not allowed and basic rights, such as free and just elections, freedom of speech, peaceful demonstrations or protests are strongly denied. That is why, most of people chose not to back the regime although they refused the Islamic project of ISIS. Regarding the physical bases of the state, the rugged areas in the northern Syria provide the fighters of ISIS and other opposite groups with invincible military strongholds. The location of these rugged area close to Turkey facilitates the smuggling of fighters, weapons, ammunitions and other military requirements inside the Syrian territory. Moreover, like in Iraq, the Sunni inhabited area could easily be safe incubators for those who fight the Alawite regime.

It is also worthy to note that a few hundreds of thousands of Turkmen, or about one percent of Syria's population are living in the borderlands between Syria and Turkey. Syrian Turkmen leaders, however, insist that the community's population is far larger, perhaps as much as 3.5 million with many members having been 'Arabized' over the past century.¹⁰ Under the Assad regimes in Syria, the Turkmen were banned from publishing or writing in Turkish. The government did not recognize them or other ethnic groups as minorities, preferring to stress the unity of the Arab nation. Under the Assad regimes in Syria, the Turkmen were banned from publishing or writing in Turkish. Soon after the start of the uprising in 2011, many of the Turkmen took up arms against the regime. They have formed numerous Turkish-trained rebel groups, including the Syrian Turkmen Brigades, reported to be about 2,000 - 10,000 strong, in 2012.¹¹ Needless to say that these groups help ISIS in its struggle against the regime.

To sum this part, one can conclude that the ethnic divisions inside the Syrian society, the totalitarian policy of the ruling regime and the physical bases of the state play a significant role in the rise and strength of ISIS.

The sub-Regional level

The relationships among the states of the Fertile Crescent contribute to the emergence and strength of sub-region's extreme groups, including al-Qaeda and its successor ISIS. Thus, some of these groups are used by one state to influence the politics of another. In this respect, the Iraqi-Syrian disputes was a crucial factor behind the emergence and strength of ISIS. At the same time, the cooperation between the two neighbours would play a crucial role in the ultimate defeat of this group.

3.1 The Iraqi-Syrian relations

In spite of the fact that the relationship between the two Ba'th regimes in Iraq and Syria has been characterized by hostility for many years, the Syrian regime did not welcome the American invasion of Iraq which led to the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, in April 2003, and establishing a pro-democratic one.

¹⁰ 'Syria's Turkmen rebels, the group at the center of the Russia-Turkey clash', **The Washington post, November 24, 2015**

¹¹ 'Who are the Turkmen in Syria?', **BBC World News, November 24, 2015**

The Syrian dissatisfaction of the political change in Iraq was based on the belief that this change could have serious consequences on the entire region, especially Iraq's neighbouring countries. Thus, the emergence of an Arab democratic state beside Syria would, of course, inspire the Syrian repressed people to press for democracy and more human rights. Moreover, the existence of tens of thousands of American troops near to the Syrian east borders would also be a source of serious concerns for the Syrian regime whose relationship to the United States witnessed a number of conflicts. Accordingly, the Syrians thought that they had no options but to make huge efforts to destabilize the change process in Iraq and to complicate the task of the Americans in spreading peace and stability there. Adopting the principle of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend', the Syrians regarded the *jihadi* groups, which fought the American occupation of Iraq, as friends. The same principle was adopted by the *jihadists*, especially al-Qaeda fighters who looked for an opportunity to avenge the heavy defeat in Afghanistan during 2002. Hence, Syria became a good friend for the *jihadists*. Al-Qaeda, according to Steven Simon, had high hopes for Iraq. Following losses suffered in Afghanistan in 2002, al-Qaeda began to look toward Iraq as a replacement beachhead. The group had long believed that in order to spread the true faith and retake the Muslim world, it must first control a state. In time, with the haven in Afghanistan under attack, Iraq would become just such a beachhead (Duffield, 2009: 17). The Syrian strategy of destabilizing Iraq wedded to al-Qaeda dream of establishing an Islamic state and gave birth to an army of *jihadists* on the Iraqi soil. Many events could confirm the cooperation between the Syrian regime and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Records captured by coalition forces in October 2007, for example, list 700 foreign recruits who joined AQI and its affiliate organizations just between August 2006 and August 2007. The most foreign fighters came from Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Syria, and the majority were students before they came to Iraq.¹² Another documents and computer data captured in a U.S. military raid at 'Sinjar', which is in western Iraq along the Syrian border, U.S. military officials showed that at least 90 percent of the foreign fighters who enter Iraq do so via the Syria-Iraq border (Perry, 2009: 92). In the beginning of September 2009, the former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki confirmed the American claims that 90 percent of foreign terrorists who infiltrate Iraq did so via Syria.¹³ Al-Maliki even warned the Syrian regime that Iraq might turn toward the Security Council of the United Nations to put an end to the Syrian support to the terrorist actions on the Iraqi soil. On his part, the Syrian regime denied all of American and Iraqi allegations. However, the eruption of the Syrian uprising and the emergence of many armed groups showed that the policy of Damascus toward Iraq and the United States was not in the advantage of the Syrian regime. Thus, the thousands of Jihadists for whom al-Assad provided incubators, trainings and military bases stabbed the

¹² Fishman, Brian, and Joseph Felter. 'Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*. 2 Jan. 2007.

¹³ France 24, September 4, 2009.

Ba'th regime in back by pointing their weapon at the Syrian army. Following an order issued by the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, an armed group of *Jihadists* was created in Syria under the leadership of Abu Mohammed al-Julani. This al-Qaeda affiliated group came to be known as al-Nusra Front.

Motivated by remarkable military triumphs in Falluja and other Iraqi cities, and the weakness of the governments in both Iraq and Syria, the leader of the then 'Islamic State in Iraq' (ISI), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called the Front of al-Nusra to unite with his organization which came to be known as 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' (ISIS). Backed by al-Zawahiri, Al-Nusra's leader, al-Julani, refused the unification. Al-Baghdadi responded to this position by declaring war against al-Nusra in the Syrian city 'Raqqa', Idlib, and Aleppo provinces with significant losses on both sides.¹⁴ On his part, al-Zawahiri released a statement disassociating his organization from ISIL, thus expelling the organization from al-Qaeda.¹⁵ However, despite the armed conflicts between the two factions of al-Qaeda, no one of them has showed mildness in the fight against the Syrian army and its supporters.

The Syrian uprising of March 2011 remarked a critical point in the Iraqi-Syrian relationship. From the very beginning of the uprising, the Iraqi government declared that the future of Syria could not be determined by any regional or global power but by the Syrians themselves. A few months later, when the peaceful uprising turned into an armed resurgence, with a sectarian characteristics, the Iraqi government aligned itself with the Alawite Syrian regime against the extreme Sunni groups whose ultimate goal of establishing Islamic rule included Iraq as well as Syria. Accordingly, it was not a surprise that these two neighboring states forgot their disputes and worked together against the power which threatened their survival.

On May 29, 2015, Philip Smyth, a researcher at the University of Maryland wrote that over the past few months, Iraqi Shiite fighters have once again expanded their role in defending the Assad regime in Syria. Beginning in late 2012, these fighters, some of them experienced, others newly recruited, formed some of the most dynamic foreign units in the war. By spring 2014, many of them had been pulled from the Syrian front to handle increasing pressure from the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq. Today, however, despite continued fighting in Iraqi hotspots such as Tikrit and Ramadi, these Shiite militias are increasingly adopting new responsibilities and reassuming older ones on many fronts in Syria.¹⁶

To summarize this part, it is easy to conclude that the policies of the Syrian regime toward the political change, which took place in Iraq in 2003, contributed

¹⁴ Daa Hadid, 'Radical Syria Rebel Pleads for Infighting to Stop', *Daily Star*, January 7, 2014.

¹⁵ Liz Sly, 'Al-Qaeda Disavows Ties to Hard-line Iraqi-Syrian Affiliate Fighting Assad', *Washington Post*, February 3, 2014

¹⁶ Philip Smyth, 'Iraqi Shiite Foreign Fighters on the Rise Again in Syria' *The Washington Institute: Improving the Quality of US Middle East Policy*, May 29, 2015.

to the emergence and strength of many extremist groups, especially al-Qaeda and its successor ISIS.

3.2 The Syrian-Lebanese relations

Due to a number of historic, geographic and societal factors, the relationship between Syria and Lebanon is quite different from other interstate relations in the region. Since the two countries gained their independence from France over 60 years ago, Syria has seen Lebanon as part of its historic territory. Damascus has been by far the dominant side in their relationship since 1976, when its 'peacekeeping' troops intervened in Lebanon's civil war and retained firm control for nearly 30 years.¹⁷

In respect to the Syrian political influence in Lebanon, the Lebanese have always been divided into two conflicting camps; pro-Syrian and anti-Syrian factions. The Shia' party 'Hezbollah', however, is the most loyal one to Damascus. That is because the huge support offered by the Syrian government to the party since its very beginning.

The establishment of Hezbollah was a reaction to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982. This fact was confirmed by the Israeli leaders themselves. The former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, for instance, put the matter succinctly in July 2006: "When we entered Lebanon ... there was no Hezbollah. We were accepted with perfumed rice and flowers by the Shia in the south. It was our presence there that created Hezbollah". Another Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated in 1995, made precisely the same point in 1987, speaking of how Israel had let the "genie out of the bottle" (Norton, 2009: 33). Iran and Syria share credit for sponsoring the revolutionary Hezbollah although Iran certainly played the leading role. For Iran, the creation of Hezbollah was a realization of the revolutionary state's zealous campaign to spread the message of the self-styled "Islamic revolution." From Syria's standpoint, the new militant Shia' party was a fortuitous instrument for preserving Syrian interests: supporting Hezbollah allowed Syria to maintain its alliance with Iran, gain the means for striking indirectly at both Israel and the United States, and keep its Lebanese allies, including the Amal movement, in line (Norton, 2009: 35). On its part, Hezbollah views its alliance with Iran and Syria as an existential one. Thus, the fall of the Iranian or Syrian regime would automatically lead to the dissolution of Hezbollah. Accordingly, it was not a surprise to see Hezbollah fighting beside the Syrian army against the extremist groups which aim at toppling the regime of Bashar al-Assad. On April 8, 2014, Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Secretary-General, gave an extended interview to *as-Safir*, a Lebanese daily. He was asked whether there are geographical limits or red lines to Hezbollah's presence in Syria, to which he answered: "We exist where we should exist". Hezbollah's intensive involvement in the Syrian civil war stressed the sectarian dimension of the conflict. On April 30, 2013, Nasrallah argued that Hezbollah's men were fighting across the border of their own volition to protect their homes and the more than 20 Lebanese Shiite-majority villages in Syria that

¹⁷ 'Syria and Lebanon to establish diplomatic relations', *The Guardian*, October 14, 2008

are close to the Lebanese border. The narrative subsequently shifted and started taking on a sectarian tone. Nasrallah argued that it was Hezbollah and the Shia's duty to defend Shia shrines in Syria from the *takfiris* (extremists), especially Sayyeda Zainab's shrine.¹⁸ By defending the shrines, he argued, Hezbollah was preventing a regional Sunni-Shiite civil war that would ensue if the shrine were demolished or violated, as had happened in Iraq following the 2006 attack on the Imam Askari mosque in Samarra (Iraq).¹⁹

There is no doubt that Nasrallah's speech could mobilize the Shiites of Lebanon to prevent their ally, al-Asad, from falling. Otherwise, the future of the Lebanese Shia', according to Nasrallah, would not differ from that of the Iraqi Shia' under the areas dominating by al-Qaeda or ISIS.

Sectarizing the Syrian conflict turns it into a very bloody one, and paved its way to spill over other countries.

3.3. The Syrian-Israeli Conflict

The uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime in March 2011 represented a security dilemma for the Israelis. On the one hand, the fall of Assad's regime is like the removal of a conduit for weapons and ammunitions flowing from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Further, with al-Assad out of the picture, Israel could devote full attention to consolidating its position over the occupied Palestinian territories. It could also fight an isolated and weaker militia of Hezbollah. On the other hand, the alternative of al-Asad could be one or more extremist Islamic groups whose ultimate goal is the elimination of Israel from the world map. Taking into account the developed arsenal which would fall in the hands of the extremists, Israel's security would be threatened.

However, so long al-Assad's regime is an ally of Iran and Hezbollah, it is a greater enemy than ISIS or al-Nusra Front which, as yet, do not impose any threat to Israel's national security. That is why the Israelis strategy at the moment is to help ISIS and al-Nusra Front against al-Asad. They have been aiding Syrian rebels on the Golan. The former Israeli ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, said in 2013, "We always preferred the bad guys who were not backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran".²⁰ According to Uni Assaf, since the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, many observers believe Israel has been bombing arms shipments from Iran, Assad's ally, as they have passed through Syria on route to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Although Israel denies supporting any side in the brutal conflict, the Jewish state has, since February 2013, provided medical care to injured Syrians. So far, 1,600 of them, most badly injured, have been treated in hospitals in northern Israel. The effort has produced uplifting stories of injured Syrian children saved by Israeli doctors. But the majority of patients have been young men of military age, and as

¹⁸ Zainab is the daughter of Imam Hussein and the granddaughter of the prophet Mohammed.

¹⁹ Slim, Randa. *'Hezbollah and Syria: From Regime Proxy to Regime Savior'*, *'Insight Turkey'*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Summer 2014

²⁰ Buchanan, Patrick J. *'The American Conservative'*, Vol. 14, No. 4, July/August 2015

the al-Makt trial shows, their affiliation with the various rebel groups remains shrouded in secrecy. Assaf has also noted that in their latest report to the U.N., the peacekeepers mentioned several meetings along the border between armed Syrian rebels and Israeli soldiers. They saw the Israelis take injured Syrians into their vehicles and load rebel trucks with sacks. What was in those sacks remains unclear, but Israeli sources, speaking in an off-the-record briefing, say the contents included food and blankets for the winter.²¹ Hence, the cooperation between the Israelis and the Syrian rebels is confirmed by many evidences. The Israeli-Syrian border which have been calm for decades after the ceasefire of 1973 is no longer safe. As noted by Avni Benny, “Quneitra and the border areas south of it are controlled by *ihadists* that are dominated by al-Nusra Front. Further north, more moderate anti-Assad groups, like the Free Syrian Army (FSA), hold territory, as do members of the Druze sect”. Benny also quoted Yehuda Harel, of the Golan Research Institute saying the Syrian army has been more dangerous for Israel than the current *ihadists*. But neither he nor anyone on either side of the Golan border can confidently predict the future”.²² Up to date, there is no sign of direct Israeli military involvement in the Syrian conflict but that does not mean that the Jewish troops will peacefully continue to stay on the Golan Heights and keep watching the battles between the rebels and the Syrian army. At the time of writing, the Syrian army is achieving a significant progress in fighting ISIS and other dissident groups to the north of Damascus. An active military campaign is also likely to take place in the southern part of the country. Then, the Syrian-Israeli border will witness a tension open for all potentials, especially in the event that Israel attempts to help the extremist groups against al-Asad regime.

It could be concluded that the Israeli role in the Fertile Crescent’s conflict aims at escalating the confrontations between the Syrian regime and its enemies. This role is motivated by the Israeli goal of destabilizing the sub-region and turning it into a number of political entities instead of a unified and strong country.

3. The regional level

For many reasons, political, economic, societal and cultural, the Fertile Crescent has always been attractive for regional interventions in its interior conflicts. These interventions, however, are varied with the strength of the intervening power and its political ideologies and geographic approximation. In this part, I will examine the role of each of the great regional powers in the current Fertile Crescent’s conflict and the consequences stemmed from these roles.

3.1 Turkey

During the Cold War, Turkey’s concerns about its national security concentrated on the northern border where the great Soviet Union has been located. By the

²¹ Uni, Assaf. ‘*Inside Israel’s Secret War in Syria; A Trial in the Golan Heights Offers a Window into How Israel Is Dealing with Violence across the Border*’ Newsweek, July 3, 2015

²² Avni, Benny. ‘*The Golan Heights, A Once Peaceful Border May Drag Israel into the Syrian Civil War*’, Newsweek, September 26, 2014

end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Turkish concerns turned mostly to the south and east. Today, Turkey faces a much more diverse set of security threats and challenges from the south and east. Among these threats are the increasing violence and sectarianism in Syria; rising Kurdish nationalism and separatism; sectarian violence in Iraq, which could spill over and draw in outside powers; the possible emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran on Turkey's doorstep; and a weak, fragmented Lebanon dominated by groups with close ties to Iran and Syria. In short, as Larrabee and Alireza Nader conclude, Turkey has focused more heavily on the Middle East because that is where the main threats to its security are located (Larrabee, 2013: 5).

That is why, Turkey is the most effective regional power intervening in the Fertile Crescent's recent conflict. This intervention has always been in the favor of the rebels who fight against the Syrian and Iraqi security forces. Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, Turkey has aligned itself with opposition which demanded the designation of the president al-Asad, and has faced the burden of hosting almost two million refugees. But its policy of allowing rebel fighters, arms shipments and refugees to pass through its territory has been exploited by foreign *jihadists* wanting to join ISIS.²³ Similarly, Turkey has backed the protests against the Iraqi former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in the fall of 2012. Moreover, Ankara provided a safe haven for many Iraqi opponents, including the former vice president, Tariq al-Hashmi, who was sentenced to death for being accused of overseeing paramilitary death squads that were responsible for carrying out more than 150 attacks on political opponents, security officials and religious pilgrims over a period of six years.²⁴ The Turkish open support to the ISIS and all of the military groups which aim at toppling the regimes in Iraq and Syria is motivated by a number of factors:

- Turkey relies on ISIS to back its military campaigns against the Kurdish separatists of PKK.
- The control of ISIS over Iraqi and Syrian oil-rich territories could assure flow of cheap oil to Turkey.²⁵
- The current Turkish leadership, particularly the president Erdogan, is dreaming of the revival of the Ottoman Empire. This dream is not far from the dream of ISIS in establishing an Islamic Caliphate. This fact was also confirmed by Norman Stone saying "President Erdogan sits in his Chinese-airport palace and sees himself as restorer of the Ottoman empire".²⁶

²³ **BBC World News, October 30, 2015**

²⁴ **BBC World News, September 15, 2012.**

²⁵ **Russia's defense ministry said on Wednesday it had proof that Turkish President Taysip Erdogan and his family were benefiting from the illegal smuggling of oil from Islamic State-held territory in Syria and Iraq (Reuters, December 2, 2015).**

²⁶ **Norman Stone, 'Erdogan's dreams of empire are perilous for Turkey', The Guardian, December 6, 2015**

- The Turkish leaders view the Shia' affiliated regimes in Iraq and Syria as pro-Iranian regimes. So the removal of these regimes would result in the weakening of Iran which is considered by Turkey as the greatest rival in the region.

On November 24, 2015, two Turkish F16 jets downed a Russian SU-24 bomber on a pretext that it violated the Turkish airspace. Such a move from the Turkish side leaves no doubt that Ankara is fighting beside ISIS not against it as the Turkish officials claims. On December 5, 2015, Turkey made an infiltration through the Iraq border by more than 1000 soldiers campaigned with fifteen tanks and other military equipment. The Iraqi ministry of foreign affairs said that the troops had entered Iraq without Baghdad's consent and that Iraq considered it "a hostile act".²⁷ This is another evidence that Turkey is attempting to confuse the already fragile alliance against ISIS.

Turkey's pro-Sunni sectarian policies, as argued by Burak Bekdil, are taking an increasingly perilous turn as they push Turkey into new confrontations, adding newcomers to an already big list of hostile countries. Never realizing that its ambitions to spread Sunni Islam over large swaths of the Middle East, especially Syria and Iraq, were bigger than its ability to do so, Turkey now finds itself confronting a formidable bloc of pro-Shiite countries: Russia, Iran, Syria, and Iraq, plus the much smaller Lebanon.²⁸

Briefly, the Turkish role in the Fertile Crescent's conflicts is destructive and contributing to the rise and strength of ISIS, al-Nusra Front and other terrorist groups.

4.2. Iran

Iran plays a leading role in defending the regime of Syrian President al-Asad and strengthening the Baghdad government in the war against (ISIS). This role is based on the belief that the fall of these two regimes in the hands of al-Qaeda or ISIS could have catastrophic consequences for Iran's national security. Thus, the Iranian western border will be vulnerable at any time. Moreover, the fall of the Syrian regime will automatically lead to the decline of Hezbollah and then to a dramatic shift in the balance of power between Iran and Israel in the favor of the later. Additionally, Turkey will exploit the triumph of ISIS to dominate the region at the expense of Iran.

The Iranian leaders deeply believe that the Americans stood behind the emergence of ISIS and they are still backing this terrorist group though they pretend fighting it. Abdullah Ganji, the managing-director of the Iranian newspaper *Javan*, which is believed to closely reflect the views of Iranian high-rank officials, says that U.S. support for ISIS is in fact a way of ensuring Israel's security and disrupting the Muslim world in the cause of advancing Western interests. "We believe that the West has been influential in the creation of ISIS for a number of reasons. First to engage Muslims against each other, to waste

²⁷ BBC World News, December 5, 2015.

²⁸ Burak Bekdil, 'Turkey's Dangerous Ambitions', *Middle East Forum*, December 24, 2015.

their energy and in this way Israel's security would be guaranteed or at least enhanced," says Ganji. "Secondly, an ugly, violent and homicidal face of Islam is presented to the world. And third, to create an inconvenience for Iran".²⁹ Further, Ganji believes that the American strategy in respect to ISIS is that "the U.S. prefers a weak ISIS that cannot be a major threat but will still cause inconvenience for Iran, Iraq and Syria and generally what they themselves called the Shiite Crescent."³⁰

Unfortunately, some events support the Iranian allegations. First of all is the failure of the 16 months of American airstrikes in defeating ISIS or, at least, stopping its extension in the Iraqi and Syrian territories. Then, the American mistakes of providing the fighters of ISIS with weapons and ammunitions. Regarding such mistakes, Iran's Supreme Leader 'Ayatollah Khamenei' wonders: "How the coalition forces have on a number of times even made weapon drops for ISIS. How is it that they have laser-guided precision munitions and bombs but drop weapons for the wrong people? And not only once but at least a number of times". Khamenei said that referring to incidents when weapons dropped from U.S. aircraft landed in ISIS-controlled areas rather than the intended Kurdish-controlled areas.³¹

Responding to the American policy and strategy towards ISIS, the Iranians committed themselves to fight ISIS with every necessary means. Iran, therefore, was the first state to support both the Syrian and Iraqi armies and security forces against the attacks of ISIS, and this support included effective military cooperation. Last October, *The Guardian* wrote that Iran was escalating its role in the war in Syria, sending hundreds of men from its elite forces to support [Bashar al-Assad](#) and dispatching its most celebrated Revolutionary Guards commander to an area where an anti-rebel offensive is expected shortly.³² In Iraq, the Iranian powerful elite force 'al-Quds' led by general Qassem Suleimani, played a crucial role in coordinating the various Shia' militias which are braced to defend Baghdad after ISIS seized the key city of Ramadi. The fall of Anbar's provincial capital, despite months of U.S.-led air strikes, marked a fresh low for the shattered Iraqi army, which beat a chaotic retreat from the city, leaving Suleimani's men to step into the breach.³³

In Syria, Iran has deployed combat troops to fight ISIS and other dissident groups. Four high-ranking officers from the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in Syria were among the Iranian casualties in Syrian conflict. One of them was Brig Gen. Hussein Hamedani, the most senior Iranian military officer to have been so far killed.³⁴ Sacrificing such a figure is an evidence that the

²⁹ Kay Armin Serjoe 'Why Iran Believes ISIS is a U.S. Creation', *TIME*, February 26, 2015

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *The Guardian*, October 14, 2015

³³ *The Daily Mail*, May 19, 2015

³⁴ *BBC World News*, October 20, 2015

Iranians have decided to support the Syrian regime regardless of the price required for this support.

The Iranian efforts of balancing the regional interventions in the conflicts of the Fertile Crescent played an essential role in saving the pro-Shia' regimes of Iraq and Syria from an eventual collapse, and putting an end to ISIS dream of establishing Caliphate in this region.

4.3 Saudi Arabia and Qatar

Despite the fact that the relationship between Iraq and Gulf states became worse after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, some of these states, such as the Saudi Arabia and Qatar, were not happy for the removal of the Iraqi regime (in 2003) by the American coalition. That could be explained by two factors. First, like most of the Middle Eastern countries, the Saudi Arabia and Qatar are ruled by totalitarian regimes and then any move toward democracy in any of the region's country is not desirable for these regimes. Second, according to the Saudis and Qataris, the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime enabled the Iraqi Shiites to rule the country and then paved the way for the Iranians to influence the Iraqi policies. As argued by Frederic Wehrey, the recent growth of Iranian influence in Shi'a-dominated Iraq, and the Iranian nuclear aspirations are seen in Riyadh as catastrophically upsetting the balance-of-power equation that had favored Saudi Arabia for more than 20 years. More distantly, the prospect of Iranian-U.S. rapprochement (or even near-term coordination on Iraq) would appear to jeopardize the privileged position Riyadh has long enjoyed in Gulf affairs (Wehrey, 2009: 2-3). Consequently, it was not a surprise to see an effective Saudi support to all of the groups which fought against both Americans and Iraqis cooperating with them. The Saudi policy towards Iraq gave incentive to the U.S. adviser in Baghdad, Zalmay Khalilzad, to describe Saudi Arabia as an engine of *jihād*.³⁵

Beside the military and financial support to the Iraqi insurgents, the Saudi clerics provided a religious justification to the terrorist attacks carried out against American targets in Iraq. This justification has always been based on the teachings and doctrines of Wahhabism, which is regarded as the most extreme Muslim sect in the recent history. Like most of Sunni Islamic fundamentalist movements, the Wahhabis advocated the fusion of state power and religion through the reestablishment of the Caliphate.

What sets Wahhabism apart from other Sunni Islamist movements is its historical obsession with purging Sufis, Shiites, and other Muslims who do not conform to its twisted interpretation of Islamic scripture.³⁶ Accordingly, many fatwas have been issued by Wahhabi clerics calling for fighting the Americans in Iraq after accusing them of bringing the Shiites to power. In November of 2004, for instance, twenty-six clerics, most of whom held positions as lecturers of Islamic studies at various Saudi state-funded universities, issued a call for jihad

³⁵ Rod Nordland and Babak Denghaphishen, "*Surge of Suicide Bombers*", *Newsweek*, August 13, 2007

³⁶ Curtin Winsor, Jr., 'Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism and the Spread of Sunni Theofascism', *Mideast Monitor*, vol.2, No. 1, June/July 2007.

against American forces in Iraq. Two Saudi officials denounced the fatwa in interviews with the Western media, but no retraction was made in Arabic to local media outlets. Months later, a Saudi dissident group released a videotape showing the Chief Justice of Saudi Arabia's Supreme Judicial Council, Saleh bin Muhammad al-Luhaidan, advising young Saudis at a government mosque on how to infiltrate Iraq and fight US troops, as well as assuring them that Saudi security forces would not punish them after their return. While Luhaidan publicly retracted his statements, videotapes of prominent Saudi clerics exhorting the public to wage jihad in Iraq and elsewhere continue to surface (Whehery, 2009: 2). In December 2006, a high-ranking cleric close to the Saudi royal family, Abdul Rahman al-Barak, denounced Shiites as an "evil sect ... more dangerous than Jews and Christians".³⁷

Taking into account the fact that the Saudi religious institutions are firmly connected to the royal rule, such fatwas and preachments reflect the real position of the Saudi authorities towards the political changes in the region.

The Saudi response to the Arab uprisings, which came to be known as 'Arab Spring', differs from country to country. Thus, while the Saudis backs the regime in Bahrain against the uprising of the vast majority of Bahraini people, they backs all of the armed groups, which fight against the Syrian regime, including al-Nusra Front and ISIS. According to Madawi al-Rasheed, the Saudi response to the whole Arab Spring, both at home and abroad, was based on the fear that an opposition to the ruling family could emerge and unite the Sunnis and Shiites against the Saudi reign. To undermine such a cross-sectarian movement, the ruling family increasingly played on sectarian fears to redirect criticism of domestic politics toward a nationalist rhetoric against Iran and the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.³⁸

Since the very beginning of the Iraqi armed resistance to the American occupation, Qatar, like Saudi Arabia, has been showing an effective support to the groups fighting the regimes in Iraq. A few years later, Qatar started to play a significant role in the 'Arab Spring'. With the exception of Bahrain, Qatar backed all of the uprising and armed insurgences which erupted in the Arab world. Toby Mattheisen argued that Qatar largely deflected political demands at home by playing a key role in the Arab Spring through its military involvement in Libya, its support for the Syrian rebels, and particularly through the TV-channel *Al-Jazeera*, which is funded by Qatar and whose coverage proved key in the ousting of Mubarak of Egypt (Mattheisen, 2013: 18-19).

The Saudi and Qatari fears from Iran's revolutionary Shiism and its nuclear program push the two Gulf States towards indirect confrontations with Iran in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen. These confrontations resulted, among other things, in the birth and strength of ISIS, the well-organized terrorist group which quickly came to impose serious threats to the entire world security. The

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Madawi al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11, no. 3, (December 2011): 513–526.

Saudi unlimited financial support, the Wahhabi fanatic ideology and the Qatari propagandist campaigns of the Qatari al-Jazeera TV-channel had the lion share in turning the Fertile Crescent into a bloody region. ISIS, according to Kamel Daoub, has a mother: the invasion of Iraq. But it also has a father: Saudi Arabia and its religious-industrial complex.³⁹

4. The International Level

Since its very early history, the Fertile Crescent has been an arena of struggle amongst different global powers. That is due to the region's richness with natural wealth and fertile lands in addition to its temperate climate and strategic location. Today's great powers, especially the United States and Russia, are also involving in a severe struggle for achieving different political and economic goals in this region. The intensive and effective military involvement of these two great powers in the Fertile Crescent brings to mind the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, which lasted for around fifty years. In the following pages, I will examine the effect of the United States and Russia in the current conflicts of the Fertile Crescent.

5.1. The United States

The United States of America is the most powerful global actor involving in the conflicts of the Middle Eastern countries, particularly those of the Fertile Crescent. Accusing it of possessing weapon of mass destruction, the United States led a wide military coalition in 2003 to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein and establish a pro-democratic regime instead of it. A few weeks later, Iraq turned into an attractive arena for many Islamist groups wishing to fight the American occupation. The most powerful one of those groups was 'al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia' which carried out many bloody attacks against American targets besides continuous attacks against both combat and civilian Iraqis.

After the American military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and the uprisings of the Sunni dominated provinces against the federal government, al-Qaeda got a very suitable circumstance to be stronger and popular. In 2013, the group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged as an outgrowth of an [Al-Qaeda affiliate](#) that fought American and Iraqi troops and waged sectarian war in Iraq. A few months after its establishing, ISIS has conquered significant parts of Syria and Iraq, declared a self-styled Caliphate and earned a reputation for extreme violence and brutality. However, the most amazing triumph, ISIS has ever achieved was the swift conquer of three Iraqi cities (Mosul, the country's second largest city, Tikrit and Kirkuk) in June 2014.

The American response to this move was not as serious as the Iraqi government expected. Thus, instead of stopping the expansion of ISIS in the Iraqi territories, the United States blamed the Iraqi government for Mosul's fall to ISIS and did not take any military action despite a series of security pacts, including a strategic framework agreement, with the Iraqi government when US troops finally left in 2011. Simon Tisdall wrote in 'The Guardian': "Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's tough-guy prime minister, bears much responsibility for the [security](#)

³⁹ Kamel Daoub, 'Saudi Arabia, an ISIS That Has Made It', *The International New York Times*, November 20, 2015

[collapse in Mosul and surrounding areas in the face of this week's hard-driving Islamist military offensive](#). But others must take their share of the blame, including the Obama administration, which appears once again to be asleep at the wheel".⁴⁰

The American response to ISIS' invasion of Iraq came so late and was motivated by other factor than the security of Iraq. This fact is also noted by Liam Stack who wrote that the United States began military action against the Islamic State in Iraq in September 2014 in response to the threat posed by its expansion and the shock of a series of videos that depicted the beheading of American hostages.⁴¹ Further, the airstrikes launched by the Americans and their allies against ISIS has not had any serious effect on the military capabilities of the organization. The capture of Anbar in May 2015 (i.e. eight months after the beginning of the American airstrikes) proved that the military campaign led by the United States were of no avail.

Furthermore, many Iraqi official figures have accused the Americans of giving hand to ISIS. For example, as reported by both Iraqi and Iranian media, Iraqi MP Majid al-Ghraoui said that "an American aircraft dropped a load of weapons and equipment to the ISIS group militants at the area of al-Dour in the province of Salahuddin. Photos were published of ISIS retrieving the weapons. The US admitted the seizure but said this was a mistake".⁴²

In Syria, since the outbreak of the uprising in March 2011, the Americans have been allying with the opposition against Bashar al-Asad's regime. By the turn of the peaceful opposition into an armed struggle of which al-Nusra Front and then ISIS had a lion share, the Americans started to distinguish between 'terrorist rebels' and 'moderate rebels'. An initial plan has been designed to coordinate with the 'moderate rebels'. According to the plan, the United States had to spend [\\$500 million to train moderate rebels](#) in Syria committed to fighting ISIS, but not the Assad government. That strategy was [heavily criticized](#) and ultimately failed. The Obama administration said that it had trained only [a handful of Syrian rebels](#), and said some of those fighters had given up some of their equipment provided by the Americans to al-Nusra Front, an Al Qaeda affiliate.⁴³ Moreover, the airstrikes carried out by the Americans and their Western allies against ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria have also been of no avail.

The source of the American duality in dealing with the Syrian conflict lies in the fact that fighting ISIS would be in the favor of al-Asad's regime, and fighting al-

⁴⁰ Simon Tisdall, 'Security collapse in Iraqi city of Mosul is not solely Maliki's responsibility', *The Guardian*, June 11, 2014

⁴¹ Liam Stack, 'How ISIS Expanded Its Threats', *International New York Times*, November 14, 2015.

⁴² Tim Anderson, 'The Insidious Relationship between Washington and ISIS: The Evidence', *Global Research* (<http://www.globalresearch.ca>), September 3, 2015.

⁴³ Liam Stack, 'How ISIS Expanded Its Threats', *International New York Times*, November 14, 2015.

Asad's regime would be in the favor of ISIS. This dilemma will continue unless the Americans change this useless strategy.

It could be concluded that the American attitude towards the conflicts caused by ISIS in Iraq and Syria is in the favor of the terrorist groups regardless the intentions behind this attitude. It is nearly impossible to believe that the United States is unable to defeat a few thousands of fighters for so long time. The American failure in fighting ISIS makes many people think that ISIS, like al-Qaeda, is an instrument created and used by the United States to punish the regimes which do not yield to the American policies in the region.

5.2 Russia

Since the very beginning of the Syrian crisis, Russia has been supporting al-Asad's regime. Many times, the Russians used the veto right in the Security Council of the United Nations to prevent any Western military intervention to topple the Syrian regime. The Russians have also provided al-Asad with whatever military equipment he needed to survive. Finally, in November 2015, the Russian jets started to hover in the Syrian airspace pursuing ISIS and other terrorist groups' fighters. Since then, the Syrian army has achieved significant victories in its struggle to recapture the territories it lost to ISIS, al-Nusra Front and other terrorist groups.

The Russian huge support to Syria is motivated by a number of factors.

According to Nikolay Kozhanov of the Carnegie Moscow Center, the most important factor is, probably, the Russians fear that the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would bring radical Islamists to power in Syria and that, in turn, would lead to further destabilization in the Middle East and consequently affect Russia's Muslim regions. Moscow is also concerned about the possible return to Russia of the 2,000 or more Russian-speakers currently fighting against Assad's forces. Moreover, Russia's economic and military interests also play a role.

Ambitions to extend the reach of the Russian navy mean Moscow needs to safeguard the supply point in Tartus, while Russian energy companies are interested in the possible oil and gas reserves along Syria's coastline.⁴⁴ Not less important is the Russian-Qatari competition over the European market of natural gas. Thus, the domination of ISIS over the northern parts of Iraq and Syria, or establishing extreme Islamic state on those territories would help Qatar to realize its long-standing dream of exporting its natural gas to Europe by pipelines traveling through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, ISIS dominated territory and Turkey.

It is also worthy to mention that War is good for business. In 2011, Russia's weapons industry exported around \$1 billion worth of arms to Syria, and there are some \$4 billion in outstanding contracts (Reuters Feb. 21, 2012).

The Russian involvement in the conflict extended to include Iran and Iraq. Thus, the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani announced that a 'Joint Military Operations Command' has been established to ensure a higher degree of coordination with Russia. [The](#) Iraqis officials also disclosed a new intelligence-

⁴⁴ Nikolay Kozhanov, *'What's at Stake for Russia in Syria?'*, The Carnegie Moscow Center, September 21, 2015

sharing agreement with Russia, Iran and Syria in the battle against ISIS, in addition to its support for the U.S.-led coalition.⁴⁵

It is difficult to predict the ultimate outcome of the Russian intervention in the Fertile Crescent' conflict. From the one hand, this intervention could ease the conflict by putting an end to ISIS, al-Nusra Front and other terrorist groups. From the other hand, this intervention could lead to confrontations with the military alliance led by the United States. The downing of a Russian jet by the Turkish air force on November 24, 2015 was an example of such confrontations. While Turkey said it hit the plane after it violated Turkey's airspace and ignored 10 warnings, the Russian president Vladimir Putin said that the shooting of the plane represents a stab in the back by the terrorists' accomplices. "I can't describe what has happened today in any other way", said Putin. "Our plane was downed over Syrian territory by an air-to-air missile from a Turkish F-16 jet. The downing of the plane would have "serious consequences for Russia's relationship with Turkey".⁴⁶

As a response to the Turkish attack, Russia immediately deployed S-400 anti-aircraft missiles at the Hmeimim airbase in Syria - a significant show of force in the troubled region. The S-400 can hit targets up to 400 km. away, so at Hmeimim the missiles cover the airspace of Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, half of Israel and a large swathe of Turkey.⁴⁷ Such an escalating could turn the conflict of the Fertile Crescent and the entire region into a full scale conflict.

Furthermore, since November 2015, Russia, Syria and Iran have been acting as a semi military alliance against ISIS and other terrorist groups in the region. Iraq welcomed this semi-alliance and allowed the Russian cruise missiles to fly over its territories toward Syria though the Iraqi officials confirmed the cooperation with the U.S. led alliance. This division into two military camps and the absence of an efficient cooperation between them bring to mind the Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, in spite of all of these facts, one can conclude that the Russian role in the conflict is positive, and the Russian airstrikes against ISIS and other terrorist groups are more effective than those of the U.S.-led coalition.

6. Conclusion

The recent conflict in the Fertile Crescent started with the emergence of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). For just a few months, this group which seceded from al-Qaeda in Iraq, succeeded in controlling territory in Iraq and Syria equal to that of the United Kingdom.

To understand the factors responsible for the swift emergence and strength of this organization, four levels of analysis are used; domestic, regional, sub-regional and global. In spite of the fact that these levels are strongly interrelated with one another, it is more useful to deal with them separately in order to achieve a comprehensive analysis of the conflict.

⁴⁵ **Tim Lister, 'Russia's Syria expedition: Why now and what's next?', CNN, October 1st. 2015**

⁴⁶ **CNN, November 25, 2015**

⁴⁷ **BBC World News, December 1st. 2015.**

On the domestic level, both of Iraq and Syria provided very suitable circumstances for the birth and strength of such an extremist group. In Iraq, the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 opened the doors for hundreds, if not thousands, of *ihadists* from many different countries around the world to enter the country to fight the American troops who invaded Iraq, and the Shiites who welcomed the invasion which helped them to get rid of the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein. These *ihadists* formed a fraction of al-Qaeda called 'al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia' and waged a merciless war against both civilian and military targets. The Sunni dominated provinces provided safe incubators for the *ihadists* who persuaded many of the Iraqi Sunnis that they have come to protect them against the *infidel* Americans and *polytheist* Shiites. The withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq in the end of 2011, and the uprisings which erupted in the Sunni provinces, a few months later, paved the way for the occurrence of ISIS. The new dissident organization succeeded in seizing large territories in west and north Iraq while the Iraqi government was occupied with suppressing the protests of the Sunnis. In June 2014, ISIS made a swift invasion of Mosul, the second large city of Iraq, and extended to Tikrit and many towns and villages located in the Sunni dominated provinces. A few days later, ISIS declared the birth of an Islamic Caliphate headed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Iraqi military divisions there, due to its bad organizing and widespread corruption, failed in making any resistance to ISIS' invasion.

Despite the recapture of many lost territories during the recent months, it is so early to say that ISIS is defeated in Iraq. The ethnic divisions inside the Iraqi society and sharing the political power on the basis of these divisions instead of competence would always be a source of conflicts.

In Syria, the uprising of 2011 which was inspired by the Arab Spring turned, after a few weeks of peaceful protests, into a severe sectarian conflict. Many of the *ihadists* who have trained on, and passed through the Syrian soil to carry out attacks against American troops, Iraqi security forces and civilians in the Shia' dominated provinces, joined al-Nusra Front, ISIS and other terrorist groups to fight al-Asad's regime.

Like in Iraq, the ethnic divisions of the Syrian society and the widespread corruption complicate the conflict from which the country has suffered for around five years. The totalitarian policies of al-Asad's regime also contributed to deepening the conflict. Thus, many secular groups and figures chose not to back the regime because of its long history of repressing the opposition.

On the sub-regional level, the cooperation between the governments of Baghdad and Damascus helped both sides to stop ISIS from extending. Many Iraqi Shia' armed groups, for instance, went to Syria to prevent ISIS from capturing Shia' holy sites.

The Lebanese Shia' party 'Hezbollah' has also involved actively in the fight against ISIS. This involvement was motivated by sectarian affiliation and the long standing alliance between the two sides against Israel. Accordingly, it was not surprise to note that Israel attempts to help the *ihadists*. For Israel, a weak or divided Syria is a strategic goal so long no peace agreement has been signed between the two parties.

The positions of the regional powers on the Fertile Crescent's conflict varied with the ideological affiliation, strategies and national security and interests of each power. Turkey and Iran are the most effective regional actors in the conflict. The Sunni Turkey would of course like to see Syria ruled by a Sunni regime instead of a pro-Shia' one. Moreover, Turkey cannot forget the huge help the separatist Turkish PKK has gotten from Syria. The Fertile Crescent's conflict also made the smuggling of cheap oil from northern Iraq and Syria to Turkey an easy task.

In contrast to Turkey, Iran aligned with the pro-Shia' regimes of Iraq and Syria. According to the Iranians, the fall of al-Asad's regime would lead to the defeat of Hezbollah by the Israelis and then shift the balance of power between the two enemies in favor for Israel. Similarly, the fall of the pro-Shia' regime in Iraq could lead to an extreme Sunni regime and then a serious threat to its national security.

The Saudi Arabia and Qatar have, since the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, played destructive roles aimed at fueling and complicating the conflicts in the Fertile Crescent. Thus, both countries offered huge material and moral support to the extremist groups in Iraq and Syria. This supportive position is motivated, among other things, by the desire of the Saudi and Qatari leaders to turn the struggle for democracy and human rights between the Arab Peoples and their totalitarian regimes into sectarian struggles in order to avoid the demands of the Saudi and Qatari peoples for democracy and freedom. Moreover, the Gulf States, especially the Saudi Arabia and Qatar, view Iran as the biggest threat to their national security. That is why they attempt to topple the pro-Iranian governments in Iraq and Syria by supporting ISIS and other terrorist groups which fight against them.

On the international level, the great powers are also divided in respect to the war against ISIS and the 'war on terrorism'. While the position of the United States on ISIS is characterized by duality and ambiguity, the Russian position is clear and certain. Many Iraqi officials have accused the Americans of not being serious in fighting ISIS. Thus, the Americans did not response immediately to the capture of the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit. Nor did they provide the Iraqi army with the necessary weapon to fight the well-armed organization. Furthermore, the airstrike campaign of the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS has been of no avail.

On the Syrian front, the United States aligned with many 'moderate' groups against the al-Asad's regime. This alignment has also been in the favor of ISIS and other terrorist groups. The Americans themselves admitted that large quantities of the weapons with which they provided the 'moderate' groups took way to ISIS and al-Nusra Front.

In contrast to the United States, Russia has been, since the very beginning of the conflict, beside the Syrian regime against ISIS and other terrorist groups. The Russian position is motivated by the fact that the intended Caliphate of ISIS is geographically closed to Russia and its eventual triumph and expansion could have disastrous consequences on some of the ethnic conflicts in Russia itself, especially in the regions where the Muslims form significant communities.

Moreover, the birth of an extremist Sunni state in northern Iraq and Syria could bring the dream of exporting Qatari natural gas to Europe through this state to reality, and then point a direct and serious blow to Russia's domination over the European market of this vital source of energy.

To sum up, the ethnic divisions and tensions, the widespread corruption, the totalitarian policies in Syria and the struggle for political power in Iraq made these countries vulnerable to invasion by ISIS and other territory groups. Further, the interventions of the regional and global powers in the interior affairs of the Fertile Crescent deepened its conflicts and turned it into Bloody Crescent.

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