

ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND LEVANT AND SYRIAN CRISIS: CHALLENGE OR OPPORTUNITY FOR MAJOR POWERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract: *Syrian crisis and emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) are the two major developments that have immensely influenced the contemporary Middle Eastern politics. This research focuses on studying state's behavior to secure its national objectives when a challenge arises. Amongst multiple perspectives of international politics, realism provides basic framework for understanding a state's behavior to ensure and safeguard its national interest. This paper studies that how regional and extra-regional powers are viewing Syrian crisis and the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, while using secondary resources of data collection. The study analyzes the standpoint of Iran and Saudi Arabia along with Russia and the United States of America regarding Syrian crisis and ISIL as a challenge or opportunity for the accomplishment of their goals in the region. The study suggests that the realist intentions of regional and extra-regional powers are the primary factors vis-à-vis disturbed geo-political landscape of Middle Eastern region. It is power politics of these powers that has made the region prone to the rise of violent non-state actors, such as Islamic State of Iraq and Levant. In addition to that, where ISIL and Syria Crisis posed a threat to the national interests of major powers in the region, it also provided them an opportunity to fill the power vacuum, and to establish themselves in the region as hegemons.*

Keywords: realism, major powers, Middle East, ISIL, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arab, America

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Introduction

The Syrian crisis and rise of ISIL are usually referred as the result of flaws in the regional order of the Middle East. Some scholars express that it is the weak nation state system that leads towards emergence of ISIL and has plunged Syria into civil war and eventually as a battle ground for the international rivalry. However, one aspect which is usually blindsided by academicians is the generation of fault lines in the Middle Eastern political scenario as consequences of the major power politics that has its roots in colonial period. However, the events in current history that Middle East witnessed, for instance, the US invasion of Iraq and Arab Spring generated the power vacuums that gave birth to the rise of ISIL and caused instability in the Middle Eastern region. These states manipulate the regional dynamics in their favor to secure their own national interests vested in the region. This research study would go back to the roots of theoretical paradigms of International Relations to understand that how major powers change and challenge regional orders in their favor.

Theoretical framework

Conflict is a part of international politics. With the rise of non-state actors, which believe in using violence to accomplish their objectives, the task for the states to secure their national objectives has become more challenging and daunting. Thus, states go to any length to counter the formidable situation generated ahead of them. This makes it a necessary for states to identify pattern of behavior of different actors in the wake of any ominous challenge. One of the dynamics of Middle Eastern politics is active participation of regional and trans-regional powers. The term great power, major power, or global power can be explained as a state which possesses economic, military, and political power and can exercise its influence on other states and non-state actors' policies.¹ In the Middle Eastern politics, the role of the USA and Russia qualifies them as major powers.

¹ Daniel Abebe, "Great Power Politics and the Structure of Foreign Relations," *Chicago Journal of International Law* (2009): 5.

Regional powers, as explained by Huntington, are states that possess significant power relation in a region, but do not have the power to extend their influence outside that particular region.² Osterud discusses the characteristics of a regional major power as a state that is a part of the geographical boundaries of a region, has influence in the regional political design, and can become a major power. Furthermore, major power can sustain in case of any coalition formed in the region.³ In the light of the Middle Eastern regional dynamics, Iran and Saudi Arab are the most capable states to be entitled as major regional powers amongst all the Middle Eastern states.

The ISIL and Syrian conflicts are the two on-going phenomena of the Middle East which are shaping and reshaping the regional dynamics. Rooted in the thoughts of Machiavelli, the realist perspective provides that states are rational and prudent actors which are goal oriented and driven by unregulated competition amongst themselves in the international politics.⁴ They evaluate their foreign policies through meticulous calculations, and execute their decisions in terms of power, as the status of a state in international system is determined by power it can carry out.⁵ In addition to that, politics among nations is all about competition, rivalry, and struggle for power.⁶ With respect to major powers, the key assumptions of realist tradition maintain that major power is a primary actor that formulates power structure of the world. The anarchic system, offensive and defensive capabilities of a state, and uncertainty in the international system raise concerns amongst states about their survival and the desire to prefer maintenance of status quo in their own favor which

² Samuel P. Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," *Foreign Affairs* (1999): 37.

³ Oyvind Osterud, "Regional Great Powers," in *Regional Great Powers in International Politics*, Iver B. Neumann, (Basingstoke, 1992), 10.

⁴ Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Denver: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 34.

⁵ Alan James, "The realism of realism: the state and the study of international relations," *Review of International Studies* 15, no. 3 (1989): 159.

⁶ Scott Burchill, "Realism and Neo-Realism," in *Theories of International Relations*, ed. Scott Burchill, et al. (New York: St. Martin press, 1996), 78.

makes states cautious and rational actors. Realist tradition also describes that major powers believe in system of self-help and that every state ensures that no other state gets benefit at her expense. Middle East is the most turbulent region in the world, filled with war and destruction, and the active role of major powers, regional and extra regional, is undeniable. Thus, a constant pattern of states, striving for ensuring their survival and protecting their national interests, is seen in the Middle Eastern politics which creates a security dilemma.

ISIL and Syrian Crisis: An Overview

ISIL is the Middle East based terrorist organization,⁷ which has its roots in Al-Qaeda. The death of Osama Bin Laden was viewed as an end of the era of terrorism. Yet the advent of ISIL as fresh wave of terrorism shocked the world in 2014. Because of its brutal and catastrophic acts, ISIL can be termed as a political extremist entity with a rigid and staunch attitude and policy towards the Middle Eastern region as well as the world outside. The Islamic State possesses appalling philosophy along with its policy of coercion to force other states to bow down to its status as the new leader of world. In addition to that, ISIL follows an ideological route to establish a world that is free from infidels as well as *takfiris*. The geographical establishment of ISIL caliphate is around the territories of Iraq and Syria, which are already facing internal, regional, and

⁷ The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant is described as a terrorist organization by several think tanks such as RAND. (Terrorist Organization), <https://www.rand.org/topics/the-islamic-state-terrorist-organization.html>. (accessed on 6 January 2019), See UN Report on Al-Qaeda and ISIL, stating both of them as organization as well as a network, where ISIL is termed as an emerging network at several places, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2018/14. (accessed on 6 January 2019). Also see, the US Department of State's website where ISIL is designated as a terrorist organization <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>. (accessed on 6 January 2019).

international challenges.⁸ The ruthless transnational terrorism conducted by ISIL has startled policymakers around the world, but one of the primary reasons behind ISIL rapid establishment was that no state, within and outside Middle Eastern region, was successful in calculating it as a potential threat. Furthermore, ISIL established itself in the geographical region which was not significant for the strategic interests of political actors in the Middle East. These miscalculations proved lethal slip-ups, which served as an opportunity for ISIL to launch itself as a self-proclaimed Caliphate, adamant to accomplish its objectives.

In addition to the threat of losing a major territory of Iraq, the danger to lose Syria to the terrorist elements became a threat to the regional as well as trans-regional power in the wake of Syrian crisis. Furthermore, the Syrian crisis that defines the contemporary political map of the Middle East is not a new aspect of the Middle East as its history is rich with military coup and authoritarian regimes. The 40 years rule of Moamar Qaddafi in Libya, twenty four years rule of Saddam Hussain in Iraq, and thirty three years long span governance of Ali Abdallah Saleh in Yemen display that once in power, Arab world tends to retain its power by using all possible measures. Syria is no exception where Hafez-ul-Assad's father ruled Syria for about three decades (1971-2000), and after his demise, his son Bashar-ul-Assad assumed office of the President. Even before beginning of the Arab Spring, Syria was facing several domestic challenges ranging from absence of political freedom, lack of economic opportunities, unemployment, and corruption under the regime of President Bashar-ul-Assad. However 2010 was the year that marked the beginning of a wave of democratization in the Middle East and Africa, where a lot of authoritarian regimes were toppled down. It was 2011, when the Arab Spring reached to Syria, where protestors who were mirroring the Arab Spring in neighboring countries, asked Assad to step down; however, Assad's regime was determined to secure its position at any cost. Soon the protestors versus government feud intensified and turned into a civil war, affecting the geo-political landscape of the

⁸ Christopher M. Blanchard, and Carla E. Humud, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2017).

Middle East in the wake of emergence of ISIL in Syrian neighborhood of Iraq. Hence, the civil war was expanded to the level where multiple regional and trans-regional actors started to support either the Assad regime or the rebels, creating the situation more tumultuous and complicated. Russia and Iran chose to support the Syrian government whereas Turkey, Saudi Arab, and the US started supporting the anti-Assad forces in the region. Since 2012, Russia, the US, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arab, and other forces contributed in curbing ISIL as well as established their role in Syria through multiple strategies, including militarily involvement in the crisis and training and supporting several non-state actors against ISIL and each other. Russia and Iran started military operation against ISIL in 2015, whereas the US along with its allies started air strikes against ISIL in Syria in 2014, after forming a coalition force. Later on, both Russia and the US started accusing each other of conducting airstrikes over each other instead over ISIL, creating a chaos in the region. Thus, shifting the Syrian civil war into Syrian crisis, a conflict amongst those powers who wanted Assad to stay in power versus those powers who wanted to topple down his regime.⁹ The Syrian crisis, in a nutshell, is an ongoing tug of war amongst multiple states, each exasperating its best to secure their national interests. Till now, the world has faced a severe refugee catastrophe along with the humanitarian calamity, resulted as the consequence of Syrian crisis. The Syrian war proved to be one of the most lethal events in terms of the consequences it bore on the national, regional, and international levels. A large number of forces are working with or against Assad's regime in Syria, making the search for peace and stability a challenge for international community. However, it is worth mentioning that all the elements involved, instead of creating a stability, are striving to safeguard their own interests in the region. It would not be wrong to say that the current Middle Eastern politics now revolves around Syrian crisis and ISIL.

⁹ Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016), 13.

Historical Contextualization

Through the lens of realism, every state strives hard for accomplishment of its national interest, which, in turn, determines its relationship with other states as well. The Middle Eastern regional landscape has witnessed power struggle at various levels. In the race for controlling scarce resources, Middle East remained an arena of politics for global powers during the period of colonialization and post-colonialization, either as a direct colony or by using ‘mandates’ of international organizations like League of Nations. In addition, the competition amongst states to control the global resources lead to multiple secret agreements between several colonial powers which are now known as Hussain-Mcmohan agreement, Sykes-Picket agreement, and Balfour declaration has sealed the fate of the Middle Eastern politics, which the world is still experiencing in the form of Israel-Palestinian issues. Later on, the cold war period also witnessed that how interests, the lust for power, and domination of the two super powers divided the world into two blocks. It is the same desire or hegemonic design that led the world plunged into Suez Canal crisis. In the post-cold war era, the world witnessed war on terrorism initiated by the USA as a display of its military, economic, and political muscle in Iraq and Afghanistan, which shuffled the Middle Eastern political scenario. However, the rise of 21st century is marked with a more active and effective role of violent non-state actors as well. The weak system of nation states in the Middle East paved the way for the rise of non-state actors. These non-state violent actors displayed state-like behavior and ambitions.¹⁰ They expanded their capacity from regional to global level and played a decisive role in determining the contours of Middle Eastern politics.¹¹ Middle Eastern political history is filled with violent non-state actors and authoritarian regimes. In addition to that, some of the organizations

¹⁰ Burcu Sari, “Transnational Terrorism under Structural Realism,” (Master thesis, Bilkent University Turkey, July 2003), <http://www.thesis.bilkent.edu.tr/0002301.pdf>.

¹¹ Şaban Kardaş, “The Transformation of the Regional Order and Non-state Armed Actors: Pathways to the Empowerment,” in *Non-State Armed Actors*, ed. M. Yeşiltaş et al. (Ankara: Springer, 2018), 24.

Hezbollah, Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood,¹² for instance, have marked their role in different states and conflicts of Middle East such as Israel-Palestine issue.¹³ However, these regional organizations were limited to the Middle Eastern politics only. The dramatic power show of ISIL at regional and global level has startled the world.

This research study intends to understand the patterns that how regional powers (Saudi Arab and Iran) and major powers (Turkey, US, and Russia) are adopting their foreign policies in the wake of challenges to their national interests. The study focuses on ISIL and Syria because the Syrian crisis and turbulent in Iraq gave ISIL the opportunity to capture the Syrian territory and establish Islamic caliphate while the Syrian crisis was already serving as battle ground for major power rivalry.

Dynamics of the Middle Eastern Politics

The events of the rise of ISIL and Syrian crisis have their roots in the dynamics of the Middle Eastern politics. They are not product of any surprise event that took the world surprisingly. As a matter of fact, the civil wars, revolutions, division in the Middle Eastern states, and the foreign influence have contributed in the emergence of both phenomena.

Arab Spring: ISIL and Syrian Crisis: Arab Spring, a wave of democratization, started from Tunisia in December 2010 which quickly spread across the Middle East. Before 2011, Middle East was largely governed by two types of regimes, either authoritative government dominated by a single party rule such as in Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Egypt or by monarchs as in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Gulf States, and Jordan. Middle East experienced a series of initially peaceful and, then, violent protests where masses demanded for

¹² It is worth mentioning that except Al-Qaeda, the status of these organizations as terrorist organization is recognized by few states, whereas some states denounce their status as a terrorist organization at all.

¹³ Sven Pöhle, "Islamist Terror Groups in Africa and Middle East," June 26, 2014, <http://www.dw.com/en/islamist-terror-groups-in-africa-and-middle-east/a-17739751>.

regime change and democratic rights. Scholars mention many economic and social factors that lead to the demand of change including unemployment, sense of deprivation, youth bulge, role of social media and discrimination against particular groups or ethnicities. Arab Spring which started from Libya proved as a major shock to the already turbulent Middle East. It threatened and challenged the monarchial, autocratic and dictatorial rules in many states of the Middle East. The peaceful protests in Libya, which bore its fruits to several countries, soon shifted into proxy and civil wars in Yemen and Syria whereas the revolutionary armed groups along with the remnants of Saddam's army transformed into militias, supporting ISIL to achieve its political objectives. A report published by Hague Center of Strategic Studies states that the emergence of ISIL is product of the time, geography, and circumstances; the withdrawal of the US from Iraq, Arab Spring, and Syrian civil war in 2011¹⁴ provided it a platform to establish and claim its authority in some provinces of Iraq and Syria. It provided non-state actors the desired power vacuum to establish their hold in the Middle Eastern grounds. In addition to that, the Arab Spring attracted major powers to intervene and manipulate the chaotic order in their favor.¹⁵

Civil Wars: The Arab Spring proved as a relative success for the Tunisians, yet threat of the emergence of a militia in the region is not out of probability. Libya and Egypt proved that change in the regime as a result of Arab Spring proved more fatal as it was followed by more violence and socio-political upheavals. A large number of states in the post-Arab Spring world fell into civil wars including Yemen and Syria which have now turned into a tug of war between major and regional powers of Iran and Saudi Arab who are supporting different factions that want to assume power in Yemen.

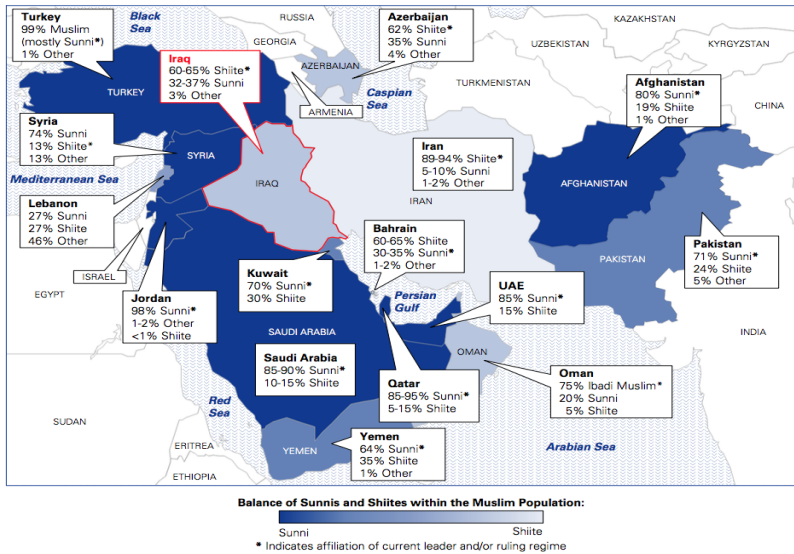
Ethno-sectarian Division: The issue of national interest between Iran and Saudi Arab ranges from physical to psychological array. Both of the states possess pride of being a major regional power and are following the policies to counter the ethno-sectarian rival, generated several challenges in the region as both of them are

¹⁴ W. T. Oosterveld et al., *The Rise and Fall of ISIS: From Evitability to Inevitability* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2017).

¹⁵ Ibid.

driven by the desire to create their own spheres of influence on petroleum rich Middle Eastern region. To understand the pattern of competition and cooperation, it is a pre-requisite to understand how each member state perceives its own objectives in the region and perceives others as a challenge to their security and objectives.

Figure 1: Ethno-sectarian division of Middle East



Source: Tyler Durde, 2016, <https://www.zerohedge.com/sites/default/files/images/user92183/imageroot/2016/01/SunniShiiteMap.png>.

Iran's foreign policy ambitions involve spread of its influence first in the Middle East and eventually around the globe. Due to its historical ties with the Middle East, Iran is interested in a subordinated Iraq, which would help her in competing with Arab countries' dominance in the region and control Persian Gulf as well as Mediterranean Sea. Out of the chaos in Middle East since 2003, Iran gained pivotal role in the Middle Eastern countries. For Iran, Syria proved as a long term ally and a sectarian friendly country that also provides a strategic route to Lebanon.¹⁶ For Iran, its nexus with Lebanon and Syria serves a triangular resistance set up against

¹⁶ Jonathan Spyer, "Is it Iran's Middle East Now?" November 9, 2015, <http://www.meforum.org/5622/iran-middle-east>.

Israel.¹⁷ Saudi Arab, on the other hand, views Iran as her rival in the region, mainly due to Iran's foreign policy objective that revolves around expansion of Islamic Revolution in other Middle Eastern countries. Whereas Iran welcomes the Arab Spring, Saudi Arab along with other monarchies in the region saved itself from the influence of revolutionary wave that shook the Middle East. Saudi Arab is considered as the leader of Sunni majority Muslims around the world, and, thus, Iran finds a gap of legitimacy in Sunni Arab states with the majority population that belongs to Shia' sect which Iran supports and intends to fill it. Thus, it can be stated that Saudi Arab and Iran's regional foreign policies are primarily responses to each other's foreign policy agendas in the region.

Interference of trans-regional major powers: Middle East served itself as a battle ground for multiple major powers. Its history is enriched with the events that conforms that how major powers used the Middle East to accomplish their objectives. The rise of ISIL and its powerful influence in the Middle Eastern politics is associated with the war on terrorism that lead to the chaos in Iraq's politics. The major powers under the flag of the US did not adopt a careful post-invasion policy, forcing Iraq and other states in the region to plunge into anarchy. The contradicting interests and objectives of these nation states are contributing in worsening the situation instead of turning towards a peaceful conclusion of Syrian crisis and elimination of ISIL.

National Interests of US, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arab, and Iran in the Middle East

The pattern of power politics in Middle Eastern region is complex and dynamic due to involvement of large number of actors, each with their own intentions and national interests which eventually contributed in shaping the Middle Eastern region. Russia possesses a number of national interests in the Middle East generally and in Syria in particularly. The first and foremost Russian foreign policy

¹⁷ Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Iran's Uncertain Standing in the Middle East," *The Washington Quarterly* (2017): 112.

objective is to secure Russian territory from the new emerging wave of Islamist radicalism in the shape of ISIL that might otherwise expand into Russia which is already facing challenge of Islamic radical organization in the former Soviet Republics, now known as the Central Asian Republics. Along with that, Russia wants to ensure that there is no threat to its naval facility in Syria which provides Russia an open trade and strategic route. Furthermore, the fall of Ba'athist regime would mark as victory of the US and a challenge to Russian to Russia's geo-political ambitions. The probability that the fall of Ba'athist regime would also give rise to violent non-state radical organizations in the Middle East would eventually challenge Russia's security in the region and at home.¹⁸ Russia also wants to install friendly regimes in the region to create long lasting geo-political alliances, to guarantee its military presence in the region, specifically around Mediterranean to grab a major share in arms, oil, and other commodities along with the development of opportunities for investment into Russia from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and to create an influence in the setting of oil and petroleum prices.¹⁹ Russia's historical rivalry with the US and her allies forced her to develop cordial relations with Iran. Like other states, Iran also acquires certain foreign policy ambitions in the region. Firstly, Iran's foreign policy principles involve spread of its influence first in Middle East and then eventually around the globe. Due to its historical ties, religious affiliation in Middle East Iran's interested in a subordinated government in Iraq, to compete with Arab countries dominance in the region and control Persian Gulf as well as Mediterranean Sea. Out of the chaos in Middle East since 2003, Iran gained pivotal role in the Middle Eastern countries, for Iran, Syria proved as a long term ally and a sectarian friendly country that also provides a strategic route to Lebanon.²⁰ For Iran, its nexus with

¹⁸ Mark N. Katz, "Russia and the Conflict in Syria: Four Myths," *Middle East Politics* (2013): 40.

¹⁹ Dimitri Trenin, *Russia in The Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25_16_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf.

²⁰ Spyer, "Iran."

Lebanon and Syria serves a triangular resistance set up against Israel.²¹

Another major extra-regional player in the Middle Eastern politics is the US that remained active in the Middle Eastern politics since the end of the World War II. The stature of the US as a strong major power's policy revolved around the establishment and survival of the Zionist state, Israel, at the cost of Palestinians and the Arab world. In addition to that, the US wanted to ensure non-disruptive supply of oil from the Middle Eastern region and particularly from Persian Gulf by adopting policies ensuring that none of the governments in the region to prove hurdle to its national interests. Furthermore, the US also supported and promoted the establishment of democratic regimes through economic and political reforms in the region and also kept a check on transnational as well as regional and state's sponsored terrorist elements which could challenge the US interests in the region.²²

The role and influence of Saudi Arab in the regional dynamics of the Middle East is evident that the Kingdom, too, possesses certain goals here. Riyadh enhances its influence in the Middle Eastern region through its religious status along with its policy of supporting and expanding its ideological and religious regime. Saudi Arab extracts its threat in the region from revolutionary Iran. The desire to be a religious leader of Muslims around the world created ethno-sectarianism as one of the most vigorous dimensions in the Middle Eastern politics. The sectarian polarization defined the contours of the Middle Easter in the geographical region under the flag of Iran and Saudi Arab, creating a visible sectarian based distinction amongst the states in the Middle East. The sectarian polarity provided both the states to follow certain policies to accomplish their regional interests. This rivalry is visible in Iraq after the end of Saddam regime, and currently in Syria. This sectarian polarity along with Iran's ambition to gain nuclear weapons contributed to further aggravate the security challenges in the Middle Eastern region for Saudi Arab where the rise

²¹ Akbarzadeh, "Iran's Uncertain Standing," 120.

²² Ian O. Lesser, Bruce R. Nardulli, and Lory A. Arghavan, "Sources of conflict in the greater Middle East," *Sources of conflict in the 21st century: Regional futures and US strategy* (1998): 171–229.

of ISIL contributed in and worsening the situation in Syria.²³ Turkey, on the other hand, is also ready to play role of regional hegemon or arbitrator in the Middle Eastern politics. According to Tim Manhoff, Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria and ISIL reflects that Turkey will not compromise on its quest to regain its status of a regional power and hegemon. Amongst other major powers, Turkey shares a unique position in the Middle East with reference to ISIL and Syrian crisis, as it is fighting with Kurdish ethnic group to prevent their emergence as a separate nation state. The weakened Syria and violent ISIL provides suitable grounds for Kurds to establish themselves in the region, which is a direct blow to the Turkish national interests in the region. Thus, one can define Turkish interests in the region into multiple dimensions where Turkey believes in combating terrorism along with its allies and international community. However, for Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Democratic Union Party (PYD) are the terrorist organizations that Turkey intends to counter, but now it has expanded its anti-terrorist policy to ISIL as well. As a matter of fact, Turkey is willing to replace the US role in Syria and against ISIL after the US. President Trump announced to withdraw its forces from Syria. One of the other national interests Turkey has in Syria is to impede all possible ways through which it can contain Kurdish territorial gains which might eventually result in an autonomous Kurdistan in the region. To prevent that, Turkey in 2016, initiated Operation Euphrates Shield to achieve two objectives along with her allies: to push ISIL away from its borders and to create a Turkish buffer zone in Northern Syria. These operations eventually resulted in establishing Turkey as one of the major powers in the region as well as diminished the role of PYD as the primary force in fight against ISIL. In nutshell, Turkish objectives in the Middle East could be viewed as Turkey's attempt to establish itself as a regional hegemon, to secure its borders from ISIL, PYD, and PKK, to prevent emergence of an autonomous Kurdistan, to display that Turkey has the potential to collaborate with international community and power to exercise its influence in Syria.

²³ Ibid., 175.

ISIL and Syrian Crisis: Challenge or Opportunity?

This section of the paper would analyze that how the US, Iran, Turkey, Russia, and Saudi Arab view the Syrian crisis and the ISIL establishment in the region while protecting their national interests.

The weak political systems, chaos in the Middle East, civil wars, and sectarianism provided a favorable environment to the mushroom grown and establishment of violent non-state actors. Amongst them, ISIL rose to immense prominence. The Syrian government's domestic condition forced it to keep a blind eye towards the increasing strength of ISIL in the Syrian territory. The wave of Arab uprising that started from Tunisia soon reached to Syria, and a movement of protest initiated against Ba'ath regime. In the beginning of the Arab Spring, Iran supported the protestors with the hope that it would alter the autocratic regimes in the region with Islamic government. However, such sentiments of Iran were tarnished when Arab Spring reached to Syria. Syria proved itself as Iran's strategic partner in the Mediterranean and Levant region. Initially, in response to the protests, Assad opted for a two-pronged strategy. Firstly, he announced reforms and a new constitution for the Syrians. Secondly, he started using military muscle, violent crackdown to arrest the protestors and crumble the anti-government protests.²⁴ However, as Iran and Syria were intended, the situation in Syria became worse, involving a large number of actors with their own interests. In 2012, Iran also presented a six point agenda to find solution of the Syrian crisis, but the anti-Assad regimes rejected as it did not provide a clause regarding removal of Ba'athist regime.²⁵ However, Iranian foreign policy towards Syria is multi-faceted, aligned with its foreign policy ambitions. By keeping Syria close in the wake of Syrian crisis, Iran has successfully engaged the Syrian territory for its benefit in case of any Israeli aggression and by providing a safe passage to Iranian supported Hezbollah. In addition

²⁴ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle For Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (London: Yale University Press, 2016), 8.

²⁵ Jubin Goodarzi, "Iran: Syria as the first line of defence," in *The Regional Struggle for Syria*, edited by Julien Barnes-Dacey et al., (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2013) 25–32.

to that, as per Iranian foreign policy of extending its influence, Iran supported Assad regime by all means. Iran extended political as well as economic hand to Syria by signing multiple banking and economic Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs), some of which though never materialized because of security dynamics of Syrian crisis.

Iran's policy towards Syria is a display of Iran's foreign policy in the region that is to support the weak states in the region while protecting its own security and national interests. The Syrian crisis provided sanctions-stricken Iran with an opportunity to gain allies and sympathizers in the region, keeping in view its foreign policy ambitions of attaining nuclear power, economic, political and ideological interests Iran is pursuing to accomplish in future.

Since its inception, ISIL openly declared the Shia' sect of Islam as non-Muslims; hence, creating a direct challenge to the ideological roots of Iran and its allies in the region. The control of Iraqi territory in the Middle East and establishment of a state considered as a direct challenge to Iran's national security as well as strategic ambitions in the Middle East. Iraq holds a significant position for Iran 'because of its Shia' majority population, existence of two religious sacred places Najaf and Karbala, as well as after 2003, and Iraq gained status of a major economic partner of Iran in the wake of sanctions imposed by the US on Iran. Furthermore, with the establishment of Maliki's government in 2008, Iraq became a true ally of Iran. The advent of ISIL, in the wake of regional power competition with Saudi Arab, a *Sunni* ideological group in Iraq's territory challenged Iran's strategic, economic, and religious objectives in the Middle East. With the aggressive advancements of ISIL in Iraqi cities to claim as a part of the Caliphate, the threat to Iranian national interests increased as well. ISIL forces put Iran-Iraq's billion dollars export list at stake. Despite all the risks and threats, Tehran adopted an indirect approach to counter the threat by providing logistical and economic support to the groups that could counterweight the ISIL. The crisis in Syria and Iraq put Iran into a difficult situation, as both states are symbol of Iran's influence in the region, and Iran cannot afford to loosen its grip in the both states.²⁶

²⁶ Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIL policy," *International Affairs* (2015): 1–15.

Syria, ISIL, and Russia

While keeping in view the geo-political and geo-strategic worth of the Middle East for Russia, it would not be an exaggeration that Russia has adopted a realistic and opportunistic foreign policy towards the Middle East. The US. actions in the Middle Eastern politics opened avenues for Russia to exercise its influence realistically. The Russian assessment of shift in global political order from a uni-polar to a multi-polar one gave it an opportunity to re-establish itself as a dominant factor in the Middle Eastern politics. Not only Russia, by adopting policy of securing Assad's regime, gained trust and support of Iran, it also expressed that Moscow is willing to play its role as a mediator and sympathizer of Iran as well. The military intervention, system of political and economic aid and assistance ensured that Russia is a sympathizer of Iran and Syria. For Moscow, ISIL poses a threat to its regional as well as domestic dynamics. ISIL on one side challenges Russian national interests in the region, as a small chunk of Russian speaking population also joined ISIL. Along with al-Qaeda and its remnants in Afghanistan, Russia is also facing issues in its backyard (Central Asia) in term of terrorist organizations like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, all in the name of spreading their version of Islamic ideology in the region. In the absence of visa management system and permeable borders, the primary concern for Russia is return of those terrorist citizens along with ISIL fighters into Russia, putting its natural security at stake.²⁷

Syria, ISIL, and Saudi Arab

It is worth to mention here that the Syrian crisis does not pose a direct military threat to Saudi Arab's regime. The Saudi's involvement in the Syrian crisis is a reaction to Iran's regional policy. The sectarian determinant of Syrian crisis forced Saudi Arab to support the cause of overthrowing the Shia' Alawaite regime of Assad who ruled the Sunni majority population in Syria. The Iranian

²⁷ Payam Mohseni, *Disrupting the Chessboard* (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 2015), <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/disrupting-chessboard>.

support policy to design a crescent of pro-Iranian states in the region challenges Saudi's aspirations to stay the leader of the Middle Eastern politics. After increase in the insecurities amongst Iran and Saudi Arab, the latter chose to escalate its influence in Syria while intervening directly in the civil war of Yemen to counter *Houthi*, who serve as Iranian proxy in the region. The demise of Ba'athist regime in Syria would serve this purpose of Riyadh. To achieve the above mentioned objectives, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia opted for a number of policy measures which include supporting the Free Syrian Army and Syrian National Council which have members from Muslim Brotherhood in majority, support and influence National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC).

The dilemma which Saudi Arab faces is that the Kingdom and ISIL have roots in the similar Islamic philosophy, yet they express two different pictures of Islam. The denouncement of Saudi Kingdom and the ambition of ISIL to establish its own kingdom lead Saudi Arab to assess its policy in the Middle Eastern region. However, due to the US tilt towards Iran on many grounds, Saudi Arab was forced to form its own foreign policy to meet the challenge posed by ISIL. The decision of establishing a coalition force of Islamic countries, attacking the ISIL forces, putting ISIL sympathizers behind the bars were some of the measures Saudi Arab took since 1979's Iranian revolution. Saudi Arab remained cautious about export of any revolutionary element within its territories posed from Iran. However, the ISIL's ideological eagerness to export its desired form of government proved a déjà vu to Riyadh. A number of terrorist attacks were conducted by ISIL in Saudi Arab which lead Riyadh to take certain desperate measures including imposing sanctions on Qatar on the charges of supporting state terrorism in the Middle Eastern region. In addition to that, the formation of a military coalition under the flag of Saudi Arab to combat terrorism reflects that Saudi government would not compromise on its geo-strategic and geo-political goals.²⁸

²⁸ Rafael L. Bardají, "Religion, Power and Chaos in the Middle East," *European View* (2016): 89.

Syria, ISIL, and the US

It is worth mentioning that the foreign policy stance of the US in the Syrian crisis is based on two factors namely anti-Iran and pro-Israel sentiments that act as a determinant of the US foreign policy. The Assad regime does not serve in extending the US objectives in their region. In addition to that, the catastrophic influence of civil war has caused a humanitarian crisis in the region, and a large number of new policy tasks arise to meet with this challenge including prevention in escalation of civil war into neighboring states of Syria, prevention of use of chemical weapons as the Middle Eastern states tend to use this lethal tools to achieve its purposes, contain and then eradicate ISIL from Syrian territory, and to mend the sectarian fault lines that would severe the situation in the region.²⁹

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the US became the champion of terrorism free world after having a terrorist attack on its land in 2001. Since then, the US adopted a strong and aggressive policy to counter terrorist organizations in the world. Elimination of Osama Bin Laden was taken as US victory in the war on terrorism. But the US in depth focus on the Al-Qaeda and Osama, made it to ignore the emergence of a new security challenge in the Middle East namely Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. It were the videos of beheading of the US soldiers that created a spur in the US decision makers, forcing the US to adopt a comprehensive strategy while keeping in view the complex dynamics of Middle East where a proxy war between regional and global major powers happening in Syria and ambitions of Russia, Saudi Arab, and Iran to gain their fair share out of the chaos in the Middle East. To counter ISIL in the region, the US under Obama administration adopted a three-pronged strategy that focused on containing and weakening ISIL with less military involvement and more of utilizing its regional alliances in the Middle east by creating a regional coalition, and by cutting off all the economic funding and finances ISIL managed to collect and to

²⁹ Ken Sofer, "Next Steps in Syria. A look at US Priorities and Interests," *Center for American Progress* (accessed November 14, 2017), <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2012/08/14/11992/nextsteps-in-syria/>.

strengthen the Middle Eastern weak nation state structure as it was evident that the weak political system provided ISIL space to emerge successfully in the Middle Eastern landscape. With the strategy of attacking ISIL through air strikes and choking off financial sources of ISIL, the US manages to contain the threat of ISIL largely; however, the actual reason behind emergence of ISIL was the US adventurous ventures in Iraq leaving a chaos behind, and this is the real challenge for the US in the future as well.³⁰ The decision of Donald Trump on December 19, 2018 to withdraw its forces from Syria while declaring that the US has won the fight against the ISIL is viewed as a chaotic and irrational foreign policy decision. As President Donald Trump's abrupt decision of withdrawing its forces would generate another power vacuum, raising challenges and opportunities for other major powers as well as for ISIL and the US trained and sponsored groups working against Assad regime.³¹

Syria, ISIL, and Turkey

Turkey's status as a major power politics in the region possesses certain unique characteristics as it served in the International coalition developed by the US to deal with ISIL's question, along with its own military operations in the Syrian territory to eliminate it along with other Kurdish organizations Turkey declared as terrorist.³² Furthermore, Turkey also collaborated with Russia and Iran along with the groups they support to develop a de-escalation zone in Idlib province of Syria.

With collaborations, Turkish President was also critical of the role of other actors in the region by stating that most of the major

³⁰ Thomas Juneau, "Containing the Islamic State," *Middle East Policy* (2015): 36–43.

³¹ Mark Landler, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "Trump Withdraws U.S. Forces from Syria, Declaring 'We Have Won Against ISIS'" *The New York Times*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html>.

³² Konstantinos Zarras, "Blurring the Borders of Conflict: ISIS between Syria and Iraq," *Tel Aviv Notes* 8, no. 5 (2014): 1–6.

powers who declared that they worked for eradication of terrorism from Middle East practically did nothing concrete to eliminate it. Ankara also believed that the solution to the Middle Eastern lies in stabilizing Syria instead of Iraq, as Erdogan stated that the primary cause behind rise of ISIL lies within the premature declaration of the US victory in Iraq and leaving its core issues un-attended. For Ankara, the US decision to leave Syria and ISIL's question provided Turkey an opportunity to establish itself as a credible actor to stabilize the Middle Eastern region as the US has no option other than Turkey to control the situation in Syria and about ISIL.³³

Conclusion

In the constant tug of war amongst these states, stability in the Middle East has become a myth. The conflicts in Yemen and Syria are continued to date. The wave of democratization sweeping across the Middle East had both its proponents and critics, while many hailed the power of the common people, a large set of critics continued to highlight the destabilized and internal divided societies of Tunisia and Libya. The absence of strong leadership, diverging interests of multiple groups, and emergence of militant outfits and transnational terrorist organization to benefit from the situation marks a question on the future of these states. On one hand, Arab Spring hit Syria in 2011, where rebels stand out to topple down Assad's regime and on the other hand, ISIS took advantage by occupying and expanding territorial influence to establish its Caliphate, an institution abolished after World War I. Syrian civil war was considered as the most complex conflict³⁴ the Middle East saw after the World War II because of its multi-layered nature and dozens of militias pursuing different goals. Beside it the involvement of regional and global powers; all of them securing their interests and shifting alliances has

³³ "US adviser meets Turkish officials after Erdogan pullout warning," January 9, 2019, *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/01/erdogan-troop-syria-pullout-partners-190108013110984.html>.

³⁴ Elfatih A. Abdelsalam, "The Arab spring: its origins, evolution and consequences four years on," *Intellectual Discourse* 23, no. 1 (2015):119–139.

prolonged the conflict. While Syrian government is regaining control of lost/ occupied territories and major cities, Assad regime is stabilizing with the aim to free every inch of the occupied Syrian territory. From the realist perspective, the Syrian crisis and ISIL proved as tools in the hands of major powers in the Middle East to exercise their foreign policy ambitions in the region. For Russia, it is the moment that it can rejuvenate itself in the Middle Eastern politics and is not willing to compromise its objectives. Russia is strengthening its military in the Syrian territory and has issued a clear signal that any offensive intervention would deal with serious consequences and might lead towards the escalation of civil war. The US, the leader of global war on terrorism, on the other hand, failed to notice and counter the emergence of another terrorist non-state actor, ISIL. Iran is also attempting to lay its influence in Syria to pursue its political and regional ambition. Furthermore, its apprehensions with respect to ISIL challenge in Iraq, its foreign policy acted as a catalyst for Saudi Arab to express its concern towards Syrian crisis and go for an anti-Iran policy. The US, who assumed the role of a global power, is also not willing to compromise its interests in the Middle East. For Turkey, it is its moment to reclaim the lost glory of Ottoman Empire and to address the Kurdish crisis not only in Iraq but in Syria as well. Rise of the ISIL and Syrian crisis in the Middle East proved as an opportunity to all the states in the region to extend or attempt to regain their lost status of a major power in the region while keeping in view their motive to secure their national interests. However, in conclusion, the civil war that was started after Arab Spring has created the Middle East as a battle ground for regional and global powers disrupting its peace where none of the state were successful in eradicating ISIL or resolve the Syrian Crisis.