



ISIS and Hezbollah

Conduits of Instability

Erika Holmquist

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Iraqi Shiite men who have volunteered to join government forces and militias in the fight against jihadists from the Islamic State group, take part in a training session in the central city of Hillah on October 18, 2014. The Islamic State group led a sweeping offensive in June that overran much of Iraq's Sunni Arab heartland.

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Sammanfattning

ISIS och Hezbollah tillhör Syrienkrigets mest tongivande aktörer. Studien undersöker vilka bakomliggande motiv som driver de båda organisationernas deltagande i kriget, och vilken påverkan deras deltagande har på deras ursprungsländer Irak och Libanon. Vid en jämförelse av organisationerna finner man att de slåss på var sin sida av slagfältet, att båda är islamistiska organisationer vars ideologier demoniserar varandra, och att de använder varandras existens för att legitimera deltagandet i kriget. Hezbollah's stöd till Assadregimen har hittills varit avgörande för regimen's överlevnad, medan ISIS ambitioner att skapa en islamisk stat hotar att rita om den regionala kartan. Rapporten illustrerar att både ISIS och Hezbollah sprider sekterism och att deras roller som aktiva intressenter i kriget har utökats som ett resultat av ett regionalt maktspel mellan bland andra Iran och Saudiarabien. Detta påverkar i sin tur Irak och Libanon där organisationerna har sina rötter. I Irak har inbördeskriget blossat upp på nytt, och ökande spänningar indikerar att Libanon kan stå näst på tur.

Summary

ISIS and Hezbollah are two of the most significant actors involved in the war in Syria. This report explores what motivates ISIS' and Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict and how that involvement affects their countries of origin, Iraq and Lebanon. When juxtaposing these actors one finds that they are active on opposite sides of the battlefield, they are both Islamist but with opposing ideologies, and they use each other's existence to legitimize their own participation in the war. Hezbollah's support has been instrumental to keeping the Assad regime in power, and ISIS is threatening to redraw the regional map with its ambitions to establish an Islamic caliphate. The report illustrates that both actors are drivers of sectarianism and that their roles as active stakeholders in the Syrian conflict have progressed as a result of regional rivalry, mainly between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This in turn has serious consequences for Iraq and Lebanon. Iraq has already succumbed to war, and as tensions increase, Lebanon could be next in line.

Abbreviations

AQ – Al-Qaeda

AQC – al-Qaeda Core

AQI – Al-Qaeda in Iraq

FSA – the Free Syrian Army

IRGC – the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

IRGC-QF – the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force

IS – the Islamic State

ISI – the Islamic State in Iraq

ISIL – the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

ISIS – the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham

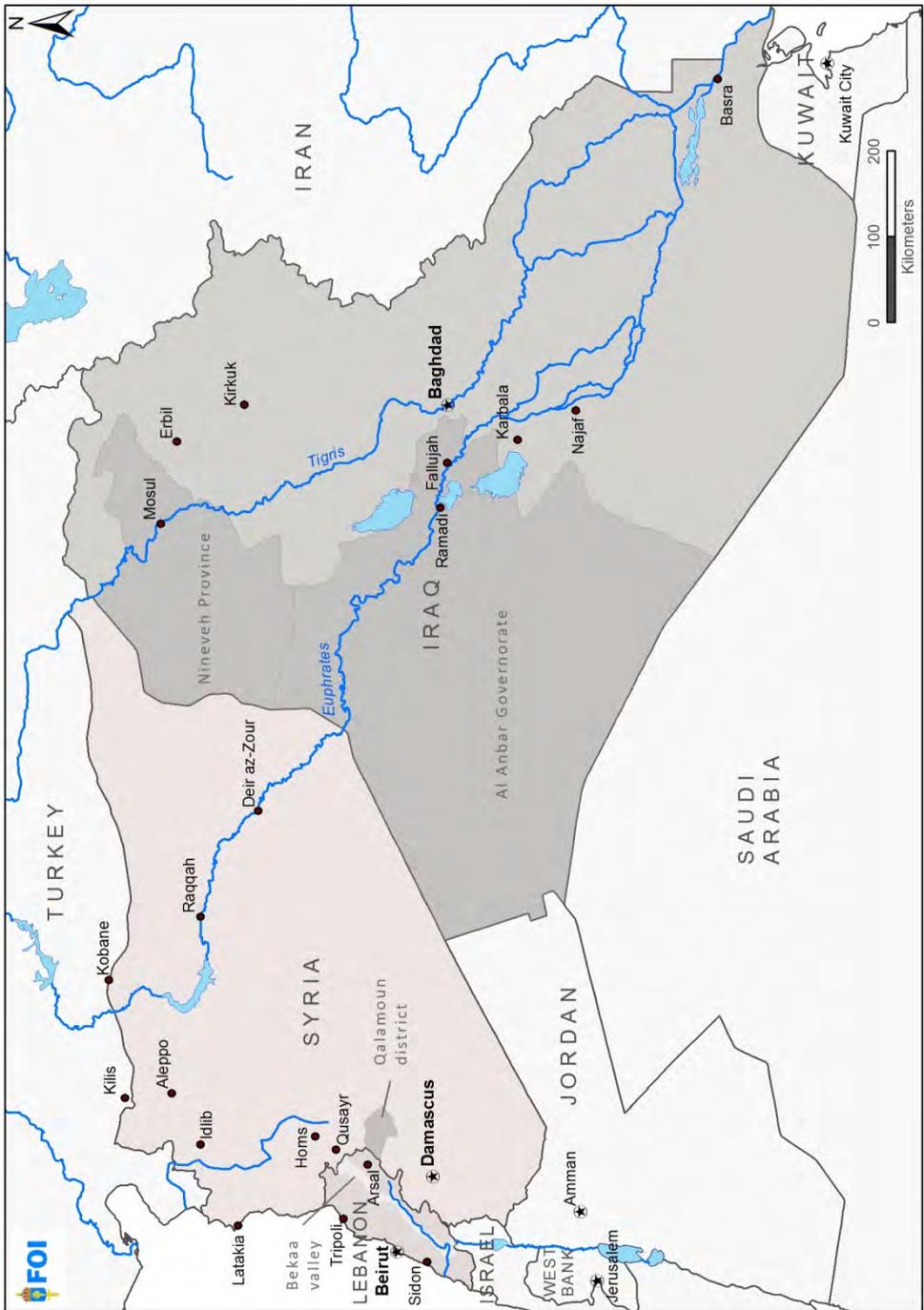
JN – Jabhat al-Nusra

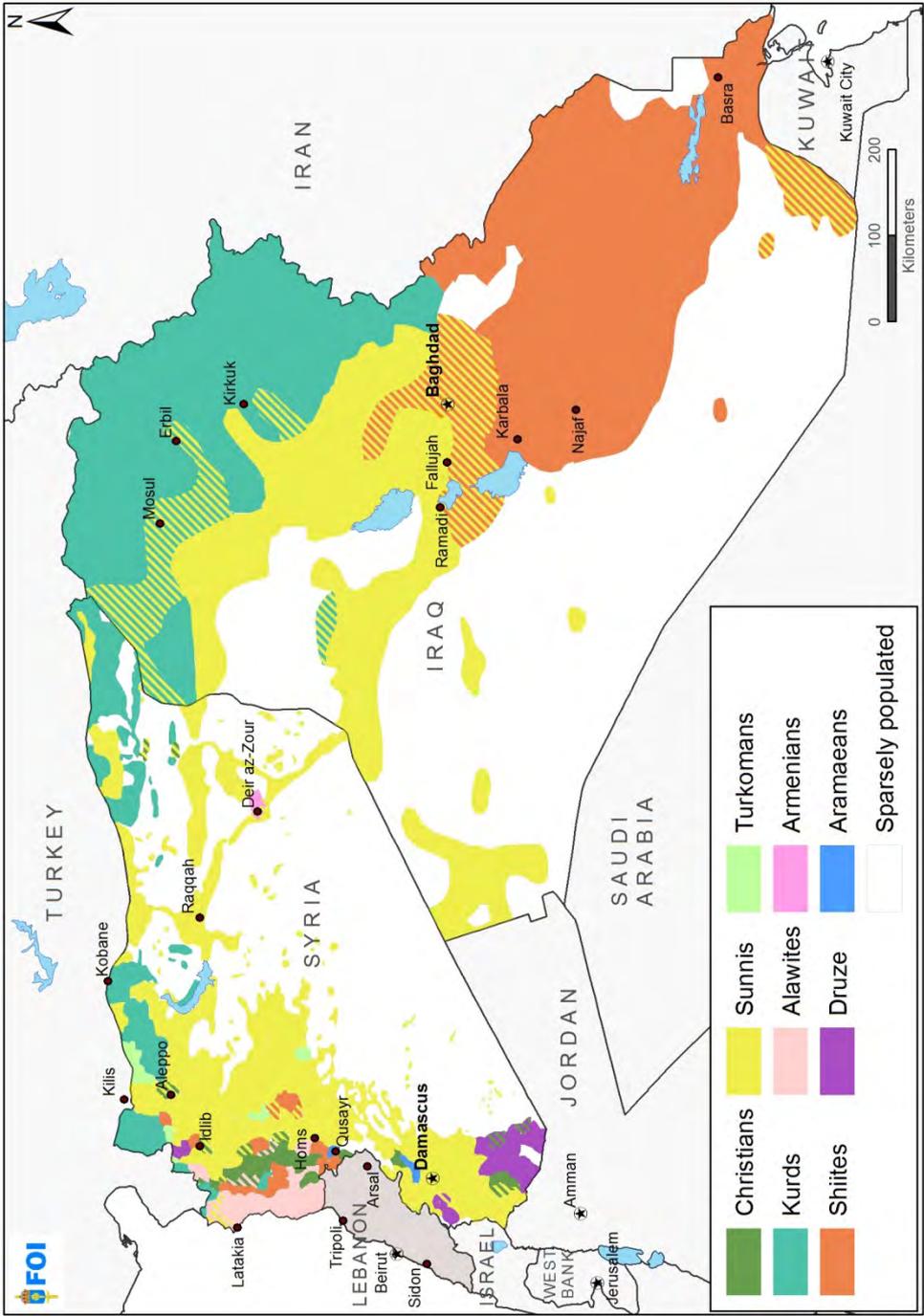
LAF – the Lebanese Armed Forces

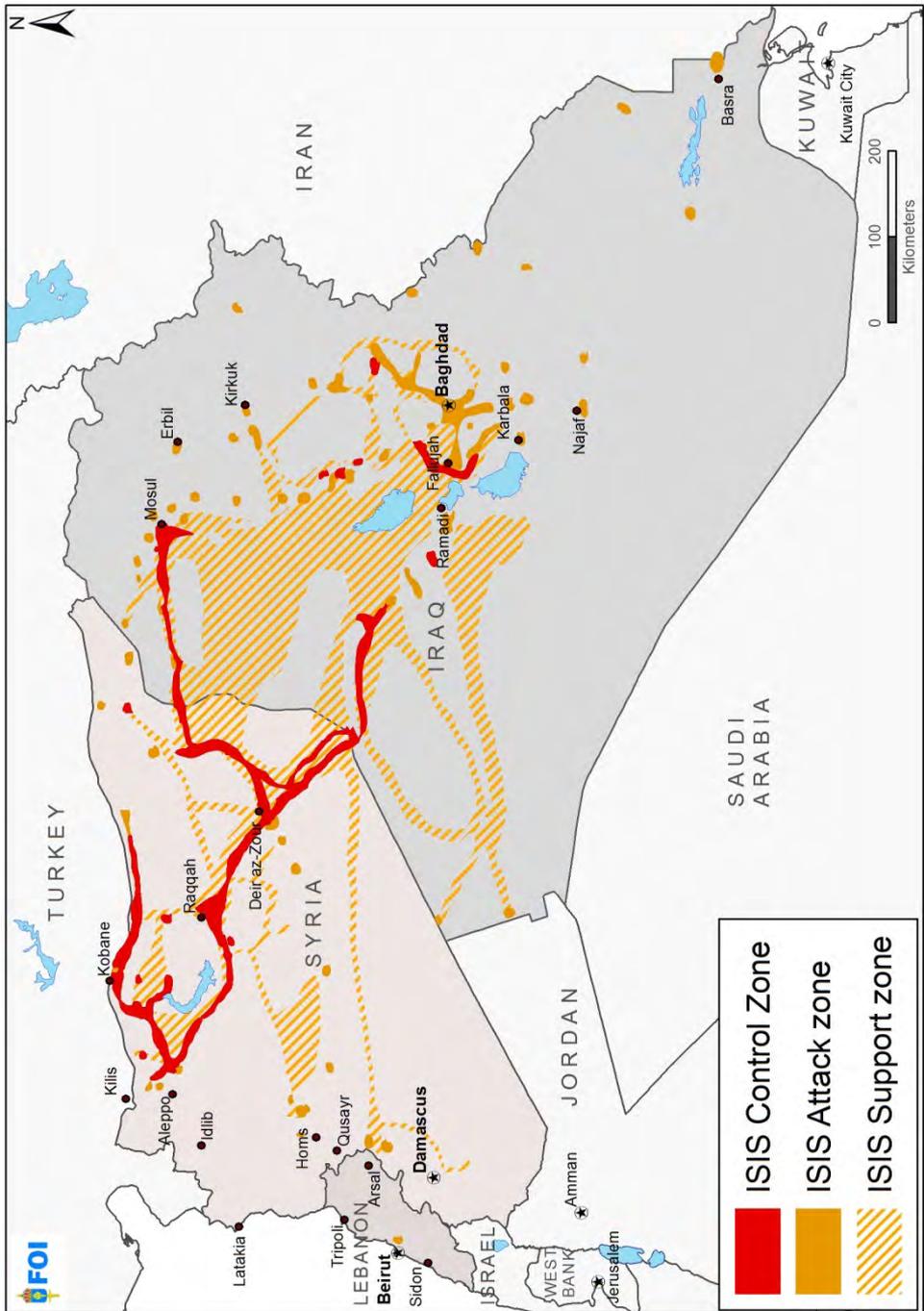
MSC – the Mujahidin Shura Council

NDF – the National Defence Forces

VBIED – Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosion Device







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1 Introduction

ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham) and Lebanese Hezbollah have come to play significant roles in the upheaval that the Middle East is currently experiencing; ISIS because it is threatening the regional order and Hezbollah because it is underpinning the Assad regime in Syria. Hezbollah which has been committed to protecting Lebanese territory against Israel since the 1980's, extended its operation to include Syria and the Syrian regime when the war began in 2011, and has since become one of the most influential actors of the war. Hezbollah's participation in the war has caused tensions to rise in Lebanon and increased the risk of conflict spreading there as well. ISIS was in its first reiteration founded in Iraq in 2004 but was subsequently weakened by the U.S./Iraqi anti-terror campaigns of 2006-2007. But, by way of the Syrian war the organization has returned to strength in a way that far surpasses its previous incarnations, and is now capable of credibly threatening Iraq's sovereignty. ISIS and Hezbollah are ideologically driven organizations that are feeding the regional spiral of violence by exploiting sectarian fault lines as a force for mobilization, and they are also opponents on the battlefield.

Both ISIS and Hezbollah carry responsibility for spreading instability outside of Syria's borders; Iraq is at war, and Lebanon could be next in line. Both Iraq and Lebanon are very sensitive to sectarianism due to their multi-ethnic and multi-religious makeups, and their recent experiences of sectarian civil wars. There are however clear differences between the two countries, the Lebanese civil war came to an end in 1990 while Iraq's civil war has gone on in varying degrees of intensity since 2003. ISIS has reactivated unaddressed grievances and caused the Iraqi conflict to accelerate again. Although under severe pressure, Lebanon compared to Iraq has shown resilience to the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict. Due to the settlement of the Lebanese civil war the Lebanese political system is sectarian in nature, and there are close ethnic, religious and political links to Syria. While Lebanon has not succumbed to war, developments in Syria polarize the Lebanese population and increase tensions.

Thus the Syrian war is at the center of a number of converging dynamics that are creating a threat of region wide destabilization. It has now been nearly four years since the war began and the various regional and international strategies for supporting the Syrian opposition seem to have failed. Assad is still in power, 200 000 people have died, and 9 million Syrians have fled their homes. Syria has become a brutal arena for geopolitical power struggles, where the exploitation of sectarianism and the practice of using ideology to legitimize excessive violence have effectively undermined the moderate agenda within the Syrian opposition. Instead the opposition has evolved into a plethora of actors with a broad range of competing goals, unable to steer developments in a decisive direction. Radical opposition groups attempt to outmaneuver moderate opposition groups, and this

gives the conflict a multiple front character. The disunity has facilitated the regime's struggle to hold on to power, as the opposition groups also fight each other. The obvious beneficiaries of the chaos marring the Syrian opposition are the Assad regime, its allies Hezbollah and Iran, and ISIS. As a consequence Hezbollah and ISIS have caused instability to spread from Syria to Iraq and Lebanon.

1.1 Purpose, outline, method, and material

ISIS and Hezbollah are actors of great importance to the war in Syria and the regional developments. Hezbollah's support has been instrumental to keeping the Assad regime in power, and ISIS' evolution into a capable military force is due to the war. ISIS threatens to redraw the regional map with its ambitions to establish an Islamic state. ISIS and Hezbollah are active on opposite sides of the battlefield, they are both Islamist but with opposing ideologies, and they are both drivers of sectarianism. To a certain extent, they have even used each other's existence to legitimize their own involvement in the Syrian conflict. Another common denominator, and the most important for the purpose of this study, is that they constitute bridges between their home countries and the war. This study will therefore use ISIS and Hezbollah as focal points for looking at effects of the Syrian war on Iraq and Lebanon, and the potential future consequences of the developments for the region. The aim is to describe what motivates these organizations' actions, and how their involvement in the war is affecting Iraq and Lebanon. The analysis does not cover their military capabilities, as the focus is on identifying the driving forces behind the organizations' choices.

Chapter one is about ISIS, and the first part aims to trace how it has evolved from an obscure al-Qaeda group into a regional threat, and to identify what drives the organization and what it wants to achieve. The second part looks at how conditions in Iraq and Syria have facilitated the rise of ISIS, and discusses what the potential implications for Iraq could be.

Chapter two is about Hezbollah, and the first part briefly outlines the ways the organization is engaging in the conflict, and how Hezbollah portrays its involvement in Syria to the public. The second part looks at how the Syrian war and Hezbollah's participation affects Lebanese security, Lebanese politics, and discusses what it could mean for Lebanon's future. Each chapter has a section of conclusions, and to finish the report there is also a section with concluding remarks which discusses three themes identified as important to developments so far, and henceforth; sectarianism, regional rivalry and the role of the international community.

In order to investigate what motivates Hezbollah's and ISIS' involvement in the Syrian war, an extensive part of the allotted time for the research was devoted to studying primary sources such as leadership statements, speeches, as well as

audio and video messages made by the organizations. This was made possible through the assistance of two very capable Arabic speaking interns; Mats Holmer and Rebecka Lind the former a co-writer of the chapter on ISIS. In order to investigate the other part of the research question, i.e. what effects the organizations' involvement in Syria have had and could have on Iraq and Lebanon, secondary sources such as media reports, academic papers and books were used. The author also did extensive interviews with officials and researchers during a field trip to Turkey in the spring of 2014. In summary the study uses a qualitative descriptive approach combining first hand and secondary sources with the aim to incorporate a wide range of perspectives.

2 The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham

with Mats Holmer

Iraq's fragile attempt at democracy is under serious threat, not only by the authoritarian actions of the Iraqi government, but from the civil war triggered by the extremist group ISIS (the Islamic state of Iraq and ash-Sham¹). During the 2014 elections, ISIS effectively sought to deter Iraqi voters from going to the polling stations by committing terror attacks, mainly in Shia dominated areas of Baghdad.² In June 2014 ISIS, or the Islamic State as it now wants to be known, surprised Iraqi authorities and the world with a swift campaign of conquest from Syria into Iraq. The takeover points to deep rifts in Iraqi society, where Iraq's Sunni population feels politically and economically discriminated. ISIS' rise and advancement is also a product of the war in Syria and an example of the ripple effects that could wash over the region unless the conflict there is solved. A renewed full scale civil war in Iraq could additionally accelerate the violent downward spiral that the Middle East is in. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate what drives ISIS and what it wants to achieve, and to discuss what this could mean for Iraq and the region. In order to answer these questions the chapter looks at the history of the organization, its ideology, and tries to outline which factors have enabled its rapid evolution from an obscure al-Qaeda group to the capable organization it is today.

2.1 The evolution of ISIS

ISIS has its roots in Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) which was founded by Jordanian born Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. After fighting the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, Zarqawi was sentenced to 15 years in Jordanian prison on terrorism charges, but was pardoned in 1999 following the accession of King Abdullah II.³ In prison al-Zarqawi reconnected with the jihadi theorist Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, whom

¹ Ash-Sham (al-Sham) is a historic term for Greater Syria, which in modern terms means the Levant. The organization is known by many names as will become apparent in the report, ISIL is short for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and is the acronym that the U.S. administration prefers to use. ISIS is short for the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham; Da'esh, which is the Arabic acronym for ad-Dawlah al-Islāmīyah fil-'Iraq wa ash-Shām; or IS, the Islamic State as the organization now prefers to be known. This report will henceforth use the acronym ISIS because it reflects the organization's current areas of engagement.

² Malone, Barry, "Iraq braces for more election violence", Aljazeera, April 26, 2014

³ Rabasa, Angel [et al.], *Beyond al-Qaeda. Part 1. The Global Jihadist Movement*, (RAND Corporation, Santa Monica CA: 2006) p. 136

he had first met in Afghanistan in the early 1990's. Al-Zarqawi became influenced by al-Maqdisi's fundamentalist views on Islamic theology and jurisprudence.⁴ Al-Maqdisi' formulated the doctrine of *al-Wala' w-al-Bara'*, which roughly means "Loyalty and Disavowal". The concept holds that Muslims must have an absolute loyalty towards, and love of, God and his law, the Sharia. It also means that Muslims must distance themselves and disavow everything that contradicts the Sharia, such as democracy.⁵ After another tour to Afghanistan where he ran a training camp for jihadists from the Levant,⁶ al-Zarqawi is thought to have fled in 2002 to an area within Kurdish dominated Iraq held by the al-Qaeda linked group Ansar al-Islam.⁷ In October 2004 he decided to give the *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) to Usama Bin Laden.⁸ Subsequently al-Zarqawi's organization *al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* (monotheism and jihad), which now fought the U.S. invaders in Iraq rebranded itself under the name *Qai'dat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* (*Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers*, or more commonly known in the West as *al-Qaeda in Iraq*, AQI).

In 2006, the umbrella group *Mujahidin Shura Council* (MSC) was founded. AQI was suffering from legitimacy issues, because most of the AQI fighters were foreigners fighting a jihad against the U.S. and they lacked a real connection to the ongoing popular struggle in Iraq. The MSC was therefore established as a measure to unify the jihadist groups fighting in Iraq,⁹ but also to give AQI an Iraqi identity. The MSC included 8 factions fighting in Iraq, and most prominent of those was AQI. Half a year later, on the morning of June 7 2006, al-Zarqawi was killed by an American airstrike.¹⁰ Under al-Zarqawi AQI launched several indiscriminate attacks on Shi'ite civilians¹¹ and employed tactics that also killed,

⁴ Kazimi, Nibras, "A Virulent Ideology in Mutation: Zarqawi Upstages Maqdisi," in Hillel Fradkin ... [et al.] *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* vol. 2 (Hudson Institute, Washington D.C.: 2005) 59-73: p 63f.

⁵ Brachman, Jarret M., *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*, (Routledge: London and New), 2009, p 22.

⁶ Ibid. p.65; It is possible that al-Zarqawi used the name *al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* in Afghanistan. See al-Baghdadi, Abu Bakr, *Wa Bashir al-Mu'minin* [Bring Good New to the Believers], May 8, 2014, accessed: 2014-04-30.

⁷ Napoleoni, Loretta, *Zarqawi: Western Fearmongering Made Flesh*, Spiked-online.com, June 13, 2006, accessed: 2014-06-03.

⁸ NBCNEWS, *al-Zarqawi Group Vows Allegiance to Bin Laden*, August 20, 2004, Published: 2004-08-20, accessed: 2014-05-12; See also al-Baghdadi, *Wa Bashir al-Mu'minin* [Bring Good New to the Believers].

⁹ Rabasa, Angel, *Beyond al-Qaeda. Part 1. The Global Jihadist Movement*, p. 141 n. 11.

¹⁰ Knickmeyer, Ellen and Finer, Jonathan, *Insurgent Leader al-Zarqawi Killed in Iraq*, The Washington Post, June 8, 2006, accessed: 2014-05-31.

¹¹ See, for example: Tavernise, Sabrina, *20 Die as Insurgents in Iraq Target Shiites*, The New York Times, September 17, 2005, accessed: 2014-06-04.

harmed and disrupted the life of Iraq's Sunnis.¹² Many Iraqis suffering from the violence of the civil war had issues with the excessive methods used by AQI.¹³ Al-Zarqawi's successors Abu Hamza al Muhajir¹⁴ and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi¹⁵ continued this tradition under the MSC banner, and were perceived by many to be even more violent and dangerous than al-Zarqawi himself.¹⁶ On October 15 2006 the MSC announced the establishment of an Islamic emirate in Iraq, and was from now on to be called *the Islamic state of Iraq* (ISI).¹⁷ The territory the state encompassed was Iraq's Western and Northern provinces.¹⁸ Soon it became clear that the emirate was a failure, mainly because the group had difficulties reconciling the diverging demands of its ideologically motivated foreign fighters with the Iraqi fighter's demands for increased political and economic influence.¹⁹ But the idea never left the organization.

The rebranding of AQI into ISI coincided with the adoption of a new strategy by the U.S. to assimilate tribal militias in the fight against the jihadist groups. Since the emergence of AQI after the American invasion, the group had competed with the tribes for control over revenue sources, such as banditry and smuggling, areas which were traditionally the tribes' domain²⁰ but was still supported by some of them. In late 2004, following the coalition assault on the Anbar province, the tribes' tacit and active support of ISI started to fade. Analysts have mapped out three main reasons. First, tribal leaders concluded that the political process was a better path to follow than continuing to fight the coalition. Second, ISI's goals were at odds with the goals of the tribes, and their methods were considered too

¹² See, for example: The New York Times, *Another Wave of Bombings hit Iraq*, September 15, 2005, accessed: 2014-06-04.

¹³ Felter, Joseph and Fishman, Brian, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records*, CTC at West Point, 2007, p. 4f.

¹⁴ CNN Arabic, *Nihayat al-Zarqawi* [The End of al-Zarqawi], September 26, 2007, accessed: 2014-05-12

¹⁵ Ibid; Anjarini, Suhaib, "Da'ish".. *min al-Iraq ila Suria* ["ISIS".. From Iraq to Syria], Al-Safir, November 1, 2013, accessed: 2014-05-12.

¹⁶ Lahoud, Nelly [et al.], *Letters From Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?*, CTC at Westpoint, Published: May 2012, p. 22f.

¹⁷ Al Arabiya, "Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin" Yu'alínu Ta'sis Imarat Islamiyya fi al-Iraq [The Mujahidin Shura Council Announces the Establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Iraq], October 15, 2006, accessed: 2014-05-12; See also: *Bayan I'lan qiyam "dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyya"* [Declaration on the Announcement of the Establishment of "The Islamic State in Iraq"], from www.tawhed.ws, November 15, 2008 accessed: 2014-05-14.

¹⁸ Roggio, Bill, *The Rump Islamic Emirate of Iraq*, The Long War Journal, October 16, 2006, accessed: 2014-04-14.

¹⁹ Felter, Joseph and Fishman, Brian, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records*, CTC at West Point, 2007, p. 28.

²⁰ Long, Austin, *The Anbar Awakening*, Survival: Global Politics and Strategy 50:2 (2008), 67-94, p.77.

violent. The tribal militias' (the Sahwa, or awakening councils) frustration gave the U.S. an opening to reach out to the tribes and support them both financially and materially on the condition of them fighting against ISI.²¹ It took until mid to late 2006 for the strategy to be adopted²² but it was immediately successful. As a result, between late 2006 and early 2007 ISI suffered considerable setbacks as the *Sahwa* turned against the organization.

In April 2010 both Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir were killed in a joint raid between Iraqi and American forces,²³ following a steady decline in manpower and authority of the terrorist group. That same year, according to the U.S. commander in Iraq, General Ray Odierno, 34 top leaders in the organization were either killed or detained.²⁴ According to one analyst, by mid-2010 ISI had lost almost all its clout in Iraq, the organization was "dead on its feet."²⁵

After the death of the group's leaders, the current leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, whose real name is believed to be Ibrahim al-Badri al-Qurashi al-Sammarai rose to prominence in ISI and was appointed Emir of the organization in 2010. He thus became the new leader at a time when ISI was severely weakened. After the setbacks ISI had to adapt to the new developments on the ground. The group eschewed earlier efforts to impose itself on territory and controlling it, instead re-transforming itself to a classic-styled terrorist group built on an underground organization.²⁶

2.2 ISIS under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

During the following years, ISI not only managed to survive in its new underground structure, but was also able to mount several highly publicized large-scale attacks. But the organization was weak and posed no existential threat to the Iraqi state. After the withdrawal of American troops in 2011, the ISI once

²¹ Hafez, Muhammad m., *Al-Qa'ida Losing Ground in Iraq*, CTC at Westpoint, December 2007.

²² Long, Austin, *The Anbar Awakening*, p. 80.

²³ Arango, Tim, *Top Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Reported Killed in Raid*, The New York Times, April 19, 2010, accessed: 2014-06-03.

²⁴ Shanker, Thom, *Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Neutralized, U.S. Says*, The New York Times, June 4, 2010, accessed: 2014-06-04.

²⁵ Knights, Michael, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 12, 2013, accessed: 2014-05-29

²⁶ Fishman, Brian, *Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, New America Foundation, July 18, 2011, accessed: 2014-05-29

again became more public, carrying out several lethal attacks.²⁷ As the Syrian conflict erupted Baghdadi seized the opportunity to create a Syrian ISI branch to participate in the struggle there. This was part of a long term two-pronged strategy to establish the Islamic State on Syrian and Iraqi territory. He sent one of his commanders to Syria and ordered him to build a branch, and thereafter to work towards realizing the Syrian part of the Islamic state. The man Baghdadi sent was a Syrian called Abu Mohammad al-Golani, who soon managed to create a group in Syria, which was named Jabhat al-Nusra (JN).²⁸

In 2012, while Golani was hard at work in Syria, Baghdadi continued in Iraq. Overall violence in Iraq increased and on July 21 al-Baghdadi announced the “Breaking the Walls” campaign. The campaign, which ran from July 21, 2012, to July 23, 2013, consisted of 24 major vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks and eight prison attacks.²⁹ The most highly publicized of which was the attack on Abu Ghraib Prison where more than 500 prisoners managed to escape, many of whom were high-profile jihadists captured during their resistance against the Americans and the new Iraqi regime.³⁰ According to renowned Iraq analyst Jessica Lewis the “Breaking the Walls” campaign showed that ISI “has reconstituted [itself] as a professional military force capable of planning, training, resourcing, and executing synchronized and complex attacks in Iraq.”³¹

Once again a credible force in Iraq, ISI released an audio message online on April 8, 2013, in which al-Baghdadi announced the merger of ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra³² under the new name *The Islamic State in Iraq and ash-Sham* (ISIS).³³ The announcement followed a call two days earlier by al-Qaeda’s senior leader Ayman al-Zawahiri for the unification of the jihad in Syria. The move signaled the group’s trans-boundary ambitions; ISI did not only fight in Iraq, but had also become an important player in the Syrian war.

²⁷ See, for example: Jaffe, Greg, *Iraq Attacks Raise Spector of al-Qaeda’s Return*, The Washington Post, July 23, 2012, accessed: 2014-06-01

²⁸ Abouzeid, Rania, *The Jihad Next Door*, Politico Magazine, June 23, 2014, accessed: 2014-06-24

²⁹ Lewis, Jessica D., “Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent, Part I”, *Middle East Security Report 14*, The Institute for the Study of War, September 2013, accessed: 2014-05-25, p. 10.

³⁰ Associated Press, *Iraq: Hundreds Escape from Abu Ghraib Jail*, The Guardian, July 22, 2013, accessed: 2014-03-28.

³¹ Lewis, Jessica D., “Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent, Part II”, *Middle East Security Report 15*, The Institute for the Study of War, September 2013, accessed: 2014-05-25, p. 7.

³² *Jabhat al-Nusra* is an al-Qaeda linked group fighting in Syria since 2011.

³³ Joscelyn, Thomas, *Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Nusrah Front Emerge as Rebranded Single Entity*, The Long War Journal, April 9, 2013, accessed: 2014-04-10; al-Baghdadi, Abu Bakr, *Wa Bashir al-Mu’minin* [Bring Good News to the Believers]

Only a few days later, Abu Muhammad al-Golani, head of the JN in Syria, released an audio message rejecting al-Baghdadi's announcement, and instead gave his allegiance to al-Zawahiri and AQC (al-Qaeda Core).³⁴ A letter, dated May 23, from al-Zawahiri was leaked in the beginning of June 2013 to the satellite channel Al Jazeera³⁵. In the letter al-Zawahiri announced that al-Baghdadi's ISIS had to be dissolved, and should focus its efforts in Iraq, while JN stays put in Syria, as AQ's only affiliate in the country.³⁶ Al-Baghdadi responded by reaffirming his group's name and that they would continue fighting in both Iraq and Syria.³⁷

With this, ISIS was officially separated from al-Qaeda, becoming the jihadi group's main opponent. In the beginning of 2014, the break sparked a wave of infighting among opposing rebel factions, primarily between ISIS and JN.³⁸ The intra rebel conflict weakened the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which had to redirect its attention from the regime to other rebels. FSA was also crippled by a decline in money and fighters. Financial backers and to-be fighters chose to join or back ISIS or JN instead as the two jihadi groups appeared stronger and more effective. Also a question of ideological appeal, many was attracted to the Islamist creed and ambitions, for example the FSA lost two whole brigades to JN in September 2013.³⁹

The evolution of the Islamic State can be summarized in three phases. In the first phase the group's ideology, vision and presence in Iraq was established. In the second phase the group failed at connecting with the popular struggle in Iraq, and at establishing an emirate there. This led to a weakening of the organization and a temporary abandonment of the idea of an Islamic state, but its realization was only postponed. In the third phase, a number of factors converged to cause the organization's successful rise; such as the leadership change to current leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, and the eruption of the Syrian war.

³⁴ Joscelyn, Thomas, *Al Nusra Front Leader Renews Allegiance to Al Qaeda, Rejects New Name*, The Long War Journal, April 10, 2013, accessed: 2014-04-10.

³⁵ Atassi, Basma, *Qaeda Chief Annuls Syrian-Iraqi Jihad Merger*. Al Jazeera, June 9, 2013, accessed: 2014-04-10.

³⁶ Joscelyn, Thomas, *Analysis: Zawahiri's Letter to Al Qaeda Branches in Syria, Iraq*, The Long War Journal, June 10, 2013, accessed: 2014-04-10.

³⁷ Al-Baghdadi, Abu Bakr, *Baqia fi al-Iraq wa-l-Sham* [Remaining in Iraq and Syria], Jihadology.com, June 15, 2013, accessed: 2014-04-15.

2.3 Ideology and portrayal of engagement: what does ISIS want?

The ideology that ISIS embraces is usually labeled Salafi-Jihadi. Salafism is their creed and in this context means that they believe that the Muslim community must return to the practices of the ancestors (which the Arabic word *salaf*⁴⁰ means). Salafism is a puritanical movement and its main conviction is that it is necessary to purify the beliefs and practices of errant Muslims. It is also an exclusive ideology that holds that a division has to be made between true Muslims, and those who are erroneous. Unity of the *Umma* (the Muslim community) is possible only when everyone adheres to Salafi beliefs, and thus as a consequence, theological diversity is not part of the Salafi philosophy.⁴¹ This is central to the threat that ISIS now poses to the region.

The main objective of the Salafi-Jihadi intellectual trend is the implementation of Islam's holy law, the sharia, on lands controlled by Muslims.⁴² As the last remaining practitioners of the original Islam that the Prophet and his companions preached, Salafi-jihadists believe that it is necessary for them to purify the beliefs and practices of Muslims, and in order to do so the use of violence is needed to oust non-Islamic influences and to establish true Islamic governance.⁴³ Violent jihad is thus ISIS' *raison d'être* and a fundamental tenet of the group's salafi-jihadi ideology. Believing that Islam is under attack, both from outside and within, jihad is the way to fight these enemies and to defend true Islam. That ISIS as a group subscribes to these beliefs is obvious from listening to their rhetoric. The implementation of sharia is a common theme in the group's audio messages and videos published online and they have on numerous occasions affirmed the incompatibility of Islam with democracy. For example, in an audio message released online, ISIS' official spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, rejects the motives of the Muslims who went out protesting and demanding democracy during the Arab Spring. Al-Adnani explains that the problems with today's Muslim societies are not the rulers but the man-made,

⁴⁰ Salaf – predecessors, forebears. Oxford Islamic Dictionary, 2014

⁴¹ Hafez, Muhammed M., "Tactics, *Takfir*, and anti-Muslim Violence", in Moghadam, Assaf and Fishman, Brian, *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions Within al-Qa'ida and its Periphery*, (Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point: NY), Published: 2010-12-16, p. 19-22.

⁴² Hafez, Muhammed M., "Tactics, *Takfir*, and anti-Muslim Violence", p. 19-22.

⁴³ Brachman, Jarret M., *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*, (Routledge: London and New York) 2009, p 5.

democratic laws which has perverted the societies and the minds of Muslims living in them.⁴⁴

Furthermore, in the declaration made by al-Baghdadi in which he announced the Islamic State in Iraq and ash-Sham in 2013, he concludes by saying that democracy is the worst evil for a true believer, and that true corruption is to be ruled by man-made laws.⁴⁵ Implying that only under sharia truth and dignity will prevail, al-Baghdadi echoes the fundamental tenet of Salafism. Democracy is by definition the rule of the people, in ISIS' worldview there is no rule except God's.

The ultimate goal is to establish the Islamic State, the Caliphate, and to impose Sharia laws within the Caliphate's territory. ISIS' strategy to establish the caliphate is to first hold and defend territory and then consolidate its authority through governance.⁴⁶ Ruling by the sharia is not just rhetoric, ISIS has implemented its interpretation of the law in territories controlled by the group. Sharia courts have been established in Fallujah⁴⁷ and Mosul⁴⁸ in Iraq, and in Aleppo Province and Raqqa in Syria,⁴⁹ just to name a few. In Raqqa, the medieval tax, *jizya*, and other regulations on Christians have been imposed.⁵⁰ In one of ISIS' released videos, scenes of medieval punishment and executions following rulings by sharia courts are shown.⁵¹ If ISIS is able to control the conquered lands on which the caliphate rests, it is very likely that the group will fulfill its promise to impose the Sharia all over.

ISIS' followers consider themselves to be the carriers of genuine Islamic faith. This is fundamental to ISIS' ideology. One poignant example is an audio message titled *For You is God, Oh The Oppressed State*, where al-Adnani justifies the jihad which ISIS is carrying out. He says that ISIS is the group that

⁴⁴ Al-Adnani, Abu Muhammad, *Al-Salmia Din Min?* [Peaceful is Whose Religion], Jihadology.com, August 30, 2013, accessed: 2014-04-11

⁴⁵ Al-Baghdadi, Abu Bakr, *Wa Bashir al-Mu'minin* [Bring Good News to the Believers], May 8, 2014, accessed: 2014-04-30

⁴⁶ Caris, Charles C. & Reynolds, Samuel, *ISIS Governance in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, July 2014, accessed: 2014-09-11, p 4.

⁴⁷ Hassan, Ala', "*Dai'sh*" *Yaftatih Mahkama Shari'a bi-'l-Fallujah*" ["ISIS" Opens Sharia-Court in "Fallujah"], al-Watan. March 26, 2014, accessed: 2014-03-26.

⁴⁸ Lefler, Jenna, *Life Under ISIS in Mosul*, Institute for the Study of War, July 28, 2014, accessed: 2014-10-11

⁴⁹ Caris, Charles C. & Reynolds, Samuel, *ISIS Governance in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, July 2014, accessed: 2014-09-11, p 4.

⁵⁰ Jawad Al-Tamimi, Aymenn, *The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham's dhimmi pact for the Christians of Raqqa province*, Syria Comment, February 26, 2014, accessed: 2014-04-03.

⁵¹ The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, *Wa man Ahsan min Allah Hukman?* [Who is Better than God in Judgement?], Jihadology.com, April 6, 2014, accessed: 2014-06-01

the Prophet Muhammad predicted would continue to fight in defense of truth and the true religion, until the end of time.⁵² They, in other words, are the legitimate force of true believers who must continue to wage jihad against unbelievers and apostates in order to liberate Muslim lands.

That ISIS' followers sees themselves as the true believers is apparent in the organization's choice of name, the Islamic State / the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham. Additional indications that they consider themselves to be representatives of "real" Islam are abundant. The leader of the group, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has taken the epithet *Amir al-Muminin* (Commander of the believers), a title that was held first by the Prophet Muhammad, and then by the first Caliphs who succeeded him. It is also not a coincidence that his *nom du guerre*, Abu Bakr, is the same as the very first caliph to succeed the Prophet Muhammad. Furthermore, Muhammad al-Adnani declared the Islamic state, a new Caliphate, in the end of June, 2014. In the audio message, al-Adnani said it was incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to Caliph Ibrahim, the name which al-Baghdadi now rules by. Al-Adnani continues by stating that Caliph Ibrahim has fulfilled all conditions in Islamic law to become the new Islamic ruler and thus the state is legitimate.⁵³

The ideology which ISIS embraces can also be described in terms of whom they consider to be their enemies. Unlike ISIS some jihadi organizations like AQC (Al-Qaeda Core) view the west, especially the United States and Israel, as the main enemy of Muslims and therefore the primary target of the movement. The followers of this trend belong to what is usually called the transnational jihadist movement. They believe that the best way to liberate the Middle East from Israel and apostate governments is to strike at these states' backers, like the U.S. and its allies. Defeating the U.S. and its allies paves the way for a victory over states in the Middle East, which in turn will lead to the establishment of an Islamic State.⁵⁴

ISIS in contrast, while considering the West to be an enemy of Islam, believes it to be a secondary target. Instead the real and more acute enemies to fight are the infidel and apostate regimes in the Muslim world. By choosing not to rule Muslim lands with sharia, these regimes have become apostates, *murtaddun*, and it is necessary to defeat them. Groups like ISIS that call for Jihad on Muslim

⁵² Al-Adnani, Abu Muhammad, *Laki Allah Ayyataha al-Dawla al-Mazluma* [For You Is God, Oh the Oppressed State], Jihadology.com, September 30, 2013, accessed: 2014-04-11.

⁵³ Al-Adnani, Abu Muhammad, *Hadha Wa'ad Allah* [This is the Promise of God], June 29, 2014, accessed: 2014-09-16.

⁵⁴ Brooke, Steven, "Strategic Fissures: The Near and Far Enemy Debate", in Moghadam, Assaf and Fishman, Brian, *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions Within al-Qa'ida and its Periphery*, (Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point: NY, December 16, 2010, p 49-54.

regimes are takfiri. Takfir means the “...pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (*kafir*) and no longer Muslim”⁵⁵. ISIS has declared numerous Muslim groups and individuals as *kuffar* (infidels/unbelievers, plur. of *kafir*) or as *murtaddun* (apostates).

The one threat, which, according to ISIS, is the greatest to God’s rule on earth, is the Shia branch of Islam. ISIS has made it explicitly clear that the Shias pose the most important threat to the Sunnis, and that fighting them is a priority.⁵⁶ In one particular audio message, al-Adnani urges the Sunnis of Iraq to take up arms in order to fight the Shias. He says that fighting the *rafidah* (a derogatory term of the Shia) is the only way to save and defend the life and honor of the Sunnis.⁵⁷ The hate against Shiites is a common theme in the group’s publications and speeches.⁵⁸ The threat of Shia Islam is continuously used to legitimize ISIS’ engagement in Syria and Iraq. Jihadists believe there is a modern Shia-Iranian conspiracy aiming to conquer the Muslim world. Both the Syrian and the Iraqi governments, which are closely affiliated to Shia Islam⁵⁹ and officially supported by the Iranian regime, are therefore viewed as legitimate and necessary targets.

2.4 What enabled ISIS’ reemergence?

At the end of 2013, at the same time as ISIS had become a powerful force on the ground in Syria, it made a radical comeback in Iraq taking control of large areas in Anbar province.⁶⁰ In Syria, ISIS managed to hold territory, focusing its grip on Raqqa in the north while trying to expand control in the east and north-eastern provinces on the border with Iraq. In June, 2014 ISIS launched an offensive in Iraq seizing Mosul and Nineveh provinces and with that the brewing Iraqi war intensified. Al-Baghdadi subsequently proclaimed the seized territory in Iraq as part of an Islamic caliphate, which extends over the border into Syria.⁶¹ The word caliphate is significant because it implies that all Muslims must bow to its

⁵⁵ Takfir. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 2014

⁵⁶ Al-Adnani, Abu Muhammad, *Saba’ Haqa’iq* [Seven Facts], January 30, 2013, accessed: 2014-04-11.

⁵⁷ Al-Adnani, Abu Muhammad, *Faqtuluhum Innahum Mushrikun* [Fight them, Verily They are Polytheists], June 15, 2013, accessed: 2014-04-11.

⁵⁸ See for example twitter feeds; see also Al-Adnani, Abu Muhammad, *Saba’ Haqa’iq* [Seven Facts],

⁵⁹ Although Syria has secular rule, the ruling family belongs to the Alawite sect, which is categorized under the Shia umbrella.

⁶⁰ Roggio, Bill, *Al Qaeda Seizes Partial Control of 2 Cities in Western Iraq*, *The Long War Journal*, January 2, 2014, accessed 2014-04-10.

⁶¹ SITE Intelgroup, *ISIS Spokesman Declares Caliphate, Rebrands Group as the Islamic State*, June 29, 2014

authority. There is also the historic connotation that the Caliph and the Caliphate is responsible for the expansion of the Islamic realm.⁶² The first Caliphs to succeed the prophet Mohammad were greatly successful in spreading Islamic rule across the Middle East and North Africa during the 600's-700's AD⁶³ and ISIS wants to emulate that experience starting with Iraq and Syria.

ISIS' successful offensive in Iraq highlighted weaknesses of the Iraqi army. There were many reports of Iraqi commanders and soldiers abandoning their posts around Mosul as ISIS approached. The Kurdish Peshmerga was forced to shoulder responsibility for the defence of Iraq's Northern provinces, and has continued to aid the Iraqi army in the fight against ISIS, with support from Iran and the United States.⁶⁴ In August 2014 media reported that ISIS had completed its takeover of Raqqa in Syria by seizing the last regime controlled army base in the province, which showed that ISIS two-pronged offensive continues.⁶⁵ In September 2014 the U.S. administration announced a strategy to "...degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL⁶⁶" in coalition with international partners. Excluding U.S. troops on the ground, the strategy entails airstrikes on key ISIS strongholds in both Syria and Iraq, while also arming and training the moderate opposition in Syria, the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq, the Iraqi army and creating a Sunni national guard in Iraq.⁶⁷ These groups will carry out necessary battles on the ground in the areas where ISIS is present.

ISIS' success so far stems from its ability to exploit a number of specific conditions in both Iraq and Syria that together have proven conducive to realizing the organization's Islamic State project. As we know from the previous sections, ISIS' long term strategy is trans-boundary and therefore developments in Iraq have an impact on developments in Syria and vice versa. Since the purpose of this chapter is to look at effects on Iraq, the following will give an overview of what has made ISIS offensive in Iraq possible.

⁶² Caliph/Caliphate, the Oxford Dictionary of Islam, August 28, 2014

⁶³ Lapidus, Ira M., A History of Islamic Societies, 2002, p. 33

⁶⁴ BBC, Iraq Profile – timeline, September 16, 2014

⁶⁵ BBC, "Syria conflict: Islamic State seizes Tabqa airbase", August 24, 2014

⁶⁶ ISIL is short for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and is the acronym that the U.S. administration prefers to use. Other names are ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham); Da'esh, which is the Arabic acronym for *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmīyah fīl-'Iraq wa ash-Shām*; or IS, the Islamic State as the organization now would like to be known.

⁶⁷ Cohen, Tom, Obama ISIS strategy includes Syria airstrikes, CNN, September 11, 2014, accessed 2014-09-19

A factor of importance is the Iraqi army's abysmal performance which became apparent with the rapid loss of Mosul in June 2014,⁶⁸ but that is not the only reason for ISIS' success. There are a number of additional dynamics that enabled ISIS to credibly threaten Iraq's sovereignty. First there is the political climate in Iraq since the end of the U.S. occupation, where the Shia dominated government has applied increasingly authoritarian and discriminatory policies that have led to a deepening of sectarian divides and popular discontent. Since Saddam Hussein was deposed, members of the Baathist elite have been completely marginalized.⁶⁹ After the withdrawal of the American troops, protests among the Sunnis have consistently been beaten down by the Iraqi army, which has led to a spiral of renewed sectarian violence.⁷⁰ Several of Iraq's Sunni tribes were disillusioned by the Maliki government and are therefore happy to see it go. The leader of the Dulaim tribe,⁷¹ Sheikh Ali Hatem al-Suleiman al-Dulaimi for example said that they would stand by ISIS until the Maliki government resigned. He confirmed in another interview that they viewed ISIS as means to an end, and not the ultimate solution, and claimed that they would "expel terrorism" once they are in control.⁷² The Sheikh also said that many of the Iraqi soldiers that abandoned their posts when ISIS attacked Mosul did so at the orders of their tribal leaders.⁷³ There are numerous media reports of Iraqis claiming to prefer ISIS to the Shia dominated Iraqi government.

Second, the country has so far not been able to redistribute wealth to any significant degree. The Sunni areas of Iraq are lagging behind development wise and although the country is one of the world's leading oil exporters,⁷⁴ there are still high levels of poverty in general, with 18,9 % of the population living below the poverty line.⁷⁵ Corruption is a serious problem.⁷⁶

Third, ISIS' participation in the Syrian war has played an instrumental role in the organization's ascent. In Syria, the group has had the opportunity to gain

⁶⁸ Arango, Tim and al-Salhy, Suadad, Sunni Militants Drive Iraqi Army Out of Mosul, The New York Times, June 10, 2014, accessed 2014-09-19

⁶⁹ For a thorough analysis see for example; Anthony H. Cordesman and Sam Khazai, Iraq in Crisis, CSIS, January 24, Chapter V, p.80-109

⁷⁰ Filkins, Dexter, "What we left behind" New Yorker, April 28, 2014, accessed: 2014-09-19

⁷¹ 3 million members, and one of the largest tribes in Iraq

⁷² Hamza Mustafa, "There is a tribal revolution in Iraq: Anbar tribal chief", Asharq al-Awsat, June 17, 2014, accessed: 2014-09-19

⁷³ Spencer, Richard and Malouf, Carol, "We will stand by Isis until Maliki steps down says leader of Iraq's biggest tribe", The Telegraph, June 29, 2014, accessed 2014-09-19

⁷⁴ U.S. Energy Information Administration, Countries, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/index.cfm?topL=exp>

⁷⁵ The World Bank, Iraq, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/iraq>

⁷⁶ Filkins, Dexter "What we left behind" New Yorker, April 28, 2014

increased combat experience, attract recruits, and strengthen its financial base. During the first months of 2014 it became evident that ISIS' approach in Syria was to avoid fighting the regime. Instead the group sought to control territory in areas where the government had no control. This was arguably done for three reasons. By controlling territory and ruling it by the Sharia, ISIS could obtain legitimacy from Salafi-Jihadi oriented groups in the Middle East and elsewhere. This is supported by the fact that the majority of foreign jihadists travelling to Syria, seek to join ISIS.⁷⁷ The jihad in Iraq is the focal point of ISIS' strategy, thus Syria has served as a base from which to attack Iraq. The areas in Syria which ISIS has sought to control are rich in natural resources; ISIS is for example reported to be selling fuel to the Assad regime.⁷⁸ Due to the oil and a number of other revenue sources like taxation and extortion, ISIS has become one of the best funded organizations in Syria.⁷⁹ This has contributed to the realization of ISIS territorial ambitions, which in Syria focused on gaining control of regions in the east in order to maintain a cross-border ability to operate in both countries, and ultimately the establishment of a cross-border caliphate.

Recalling ISIS' three development phases that were previously discussed; ISIS has now entered a fourth. The group has gone from being a part of Al-Qaida to being its premier competitor, the Caliphate has been announced, and the region and the world is slowly acknowledging that ISIS poses a real threat. Plenty of the international community's attention is focused on the organization's activities, and at the same time the Islamic state project is attracting support from other jihadist movements, and foreign fighters around the globe. This support is in part fuelled by the U.S. and coalition attempts to weaken ISIS through airstrikes.⁸⁰ The key question is where developments will go from here.

2.5 Implications for Iraq: sectarianism, civil war and secession

ISIS currently controls the Syrian provinces of Deir az-Zour and Raqqa, and great areas across the border in Western Iraq. Besides maintaining the already seized areas of the Islamic State, attacking Baghdad will be the main prize

⁷⁷ Jawad al-Tammimi, Aymenn, "The Syrian rebel groups pulling in foreign fighters", BBC, December 24, 2013, accessed: 2014-09-22

⁷⁸ Hubbard, Ben, Krauss, Clifford and Smith, Eric "Rebels in Syria claim control of resources", The New York Times, January 28, 2014

⁷⁹ For a thorough analysis see "Following the Money: Financing the Territorial Expansion of Islamist Insurgents in Syria" by Michael Jonsson, FOI.

⁸⁰ Chiacu, Doina, U.S. airstrikes boost Islamic State, more hostages possible, Reuters, September 17, 2014, accessed: 2014-09-22

operationally for ISIS. But they have also announced that they will march on Karbala and Najaf, two of Shia Islam's symbolically most important cities.⁸¹ The blatant sectarian rhetoric of ISIS and the violence which accompany it are very problematic for Iraq, and for the wider Middle East. Although influential religious leaders in Iraq have preached unity and warned against sectarianism, in light of ISIS' advances they have also urged Iraqis to take up arms to protect the country.⁸² Mobilization with religious connotations is taking place. After Ayatollah al-Sistani's fatwa Shias have signed up as volunteers in great numbers, and the Shia militias that were disbanded after the war have been reestablished.⁸³ Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr has called on loyalists to create 'peace brigades' and protect holy sites, which means the reconstitution of al-Sadr's militia the Mahdi brigade, one of the most violent sectarian organizations of the previous civil war.⁸⁴

In case of an attack on the holy cities of Karbala or Najaf, seizing them would not be as easy as taking Mosul.⁸⁵ An attempt could spark an uncontrollable conflict with possible influx of Shia fighters from outside Iraq, much like what has happened in Syria. The difference is that the holy Shrines of Karbala and Najaf are much more important than those in Syria (further described in the next chapter on Hezbollah), and perhaps their power to mobilize fighters will be greater. The question is if such a development really caters to ISIS' interests? Strategically it might not, but ISIS is in the end an organization with a strict religious foundation. One should assume that at least the core members believe what they preach. Considering that jihad is ISIS' source of legitimacy a full scale sectarian war could be what they are aiming for, because it may instigate the self-destruction of the Iraqi state and severely diminish the influence of the Shia.

There are some additional dimensions to the crisis besides Sunni-Shia violence to consider. Although Shias are viewed as the worst kind of heretics, it is important to remember that ISIS' ideology rejects theological diversity, which essentially means that all those that diverge from ISIS' line of thinking are legitimate targets. There is also the Kurdish expansion of control into Kirkuk and the proposed Kurdish referendum on independence which has not been touched upon here.⁸⁶ If the Kurds manage to realize their ambition, combined with the potential

⁸¹ Karbala, Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2014

⁸² Morris, Loveday, "Shiite cleric Sistani backs Iraqi government's call for volunteers to fight advancing militants", Washington Post, June 13, 2014

⁸³ Hashem, Ali, "Did Shiite fatwa save Baghdad from 'Islamic State'?", Almonitor, July 2, 2014

⁸⁴ Vinograd, Cassandra, "Muqtada al-Sadr issues warning to Iraq's ISIS Militants", NBC News, June 26, 2014

⁸⁵ Lewis, Jessica D., "The Battle for Baghdad: Scenarios", Institute for the Study of War, June 13, 2014

⁸⁶ Rudaw, "President Barzani: Kurdistan Independence Referendum in Months", July 2, 2014

escalation of violence along sectarian lines, it would mean a *de facto* partition of the country. In any case, continued violence is to be expected considering that the alliance between some of the Sunni tribes and ISIS is a marriage of convenience only until certain political goals are reached. Against this background it is clear that the U.S. coalition strategy to defeat ISIS carries a great deal of risk, considering that it rests on arming and training the Kurdish Peshmerga, the predominantly Shia Iraqi army and a yet to be created Sunni component. These groups have many differences to overcome before there will be peace in Iraq, regardless of whether ISIS has a presence in the country or not. Herein lies the main difficulty in solving the Iraqi crisis. But, on top of Iraq's national difficulties there is a struggle for regional power that further complicates the conflict.

2.6 The irony of regional rivalry: Iran and Saudi Arabia

The swift establishment of the Caliphate has shaken Iraq's influential neighbors Iran and Saudi Arabia. Neither regime is comfortable with the existence of the Islamic State. This is somewhat ironic because both countries have indirectly contributed to ISIS success through their actions in Syria, where the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry is a key component. By supporting opposing sides of the Syrian conflict, Iran and Saudi Arabia are fuelling the conflict's progression. Like Syria, Iraq is an arena where the Iran-Saudi rivalry plays out, Saudi Arabia has traditionally supported the Sunni political establishment in Iraq, along with Saudi-friendly Sunni tribes, while Iran supports the Shia-ruling party Dawa, in addition to various Shia militias.⁸⁷

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have a long history of financing and even arming foreign proxies in order to further their own interests, with deepened sectarian rifts as a byproduct. There are even conspiracy theories that Saudi Arabia created ISIS in order to cripple Iran and its allied regimes in Syria and Iraq. It is true that Saudi Arabia views Iran as its nemesis, and blames Iran for what is happening not just in Syria but also in Iraq. In terms of Iraq the Saudi regime believes it is the former Iraqi PM Maliki's non-inclusive policies, and the fact that Iran is allowed too great an influence over the Iraqi government that has created the current situation of popular discontent. However, the idea of ISIS as a Saudi weapon seems far-fetched, because ISIS, in its current form also poses a

⁸⁷ Cockburn, Patrick, "How Saudi Arabia helped ISIS take over the north of the country", The Independent, July 13, 2014

threat to Saudi Arabia.⁸⁸ ISIS' proclamation of the Caliphate damages Saudi Arabia's religious legitimacy,⁸⁹ because ISIS' rhetoric and ideological stance imply that no other regime on earth is as faithful to Islam as the Islamic State. In ISIS' eyes, the Saudi regime is apostate, because it has not fulfilled its obligation of creating an Islamic state as decreed by Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia's state ideology.⁹⁰ This perception thus questions the usefulness of the Saudi Monarchy.

Possibly afraid that ISIS' ideas could resonate with segments of the population, Saudi Arabia designated ISIS along with the Muslim Brotherhood as a terror organization in March 2014, and made monetary donations to and joining terror organizations punishable by law.⁹¹ Since authorities have increased their efforts to stifle private donations, Saudi Arabian ISIS supporters channel contributions through Kuwait.⁹² Saudi Arabia has also joined the U.S. led coalition to defeat ISIS, and will contribute with training and arming of 'moderate' Syrian rebels.

Iran's perspective on Iraq differs from Saudi Arabia's. Iran has been a close ally to the Maliki government from the beginning and some even argue that Iran played an instrumental role alongside the Americans in Maliki's rise to power. Now as Maliki has left office, Iran needs to find ways to safeguard its influence, and has openly given its support to the new Shia Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Media reports claim that Iran has sent military advisors, including Qods force commander Qassem Suleimani, tasked specifically to aid in the protection of Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf.⁹³ Iran has also provided Shia militias, the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga with various kinds of military support, mainly advice and equipment.⁹⁴

When it comes to ISIS and the Syrian war, Iran has, like Hezbollah, stressed the *takfiri* threat (discussed in the next chapter). This narrative disregards any

⁸⁸ Almarzoqi Albogami, Mansour, "Saudi Arabia: Don't blame it all on the Islamic State", Aljazeera, July 9, 2014

⁸⁹ As the custodian of the two holy mosques, Saudi Arabia has always had a special status within the Islamic world.

⁹⁰ Al-Ibrahim, Fouad, "Why ISIS is a threat to Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism's deferred promise", Al Akhbar English, August 22, 2014

⁹¹ Ajbaili, Mustapha "Saudi: Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group", Al Arabiya News, March 7, 2014

⁹² Plotkin Boghart, Lori, "Saudi funding of ISIS", The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, June 23, 2014

⁹³ Fassihi, Farnaz, "Iran Deploys Forces to Fight alQaeda-Inspired Militants in Iraq", The Wall Street Journal, June 12, 2014; Black, Ian and Kamali Dehghan, Saeed, "Qassim Suleimani: commander of Quds force, puppeteer of the Middle East", June 16, 2014

⁹⁴ BBC Persian, *Sar lashkar Jaafari: Sepah-e Qods dar sarasar-e donya be mazlooman komak mikonad* [Commander Jaafari: the Qods force aids oppressed all over the world], September 16, 2014

dimension of a popular uprising; terrorists are attacking the Syrian regime. Maintaining this interpretation of the events is a question of necessity, because Syria's fate is in some spheres of the political and military establishments of Iran, viewed almost as an existential issue. Stressing the *takfiri* threat gives Iranian involvement legitimacy. In a speech to the Basij in early 2013 which by now has become quite famous, hardline cleric Hojatoleslam Mehdi Taeb said that Syria is Iran's 35th province, and that if Iran cannot keep Syria it cannot keep Tehran.⁹⁵ His remark clearly illustrates Syria's importance in Iran's geostrategic calculus. The relationship with Iraq has since 2003 become almost as important, but with a renewed civil war, Iran's influence there is threatened. Thus a similar narrative to the one on Syria is being applied to developments in Iraq. Underlying factors like sectarian discrimination or poverty are generally underplayed in the Iranian media and the main focus is on ISIS' terrorism. Ayatollah Khamenei has warned several times that the *takfiris* are trying to wreak havoc and push the region into a sectarian war.

Iran has offered to help Iraq. For example, President Rouhani said in a speech that if Iraq asks, Iran would assist in any way possible to fight ISIS.⁹⁶ He also opened up the possibility of cooperating with the U.S. This idea was later countered by the chief of the Supreme National Security Council who said that Iran would only aid Iraq bilaterally.⁹⁷ Cooperation with the U.S. is too sensitive for the conservative strata in Iran. Any cooperation between them would for ideological reasons need to take place behind the scenes. Iran has played a long-term role in mobilizing Shia militias in Iraq mainly through the influence of the Iranian Qods force.⁹⁸ Iran is currently supporting militias from Iraq to fight in Syria and now some have returned home to Iraq. ISIS' actions are a real threat to Iran's geopolitical and ideological interests.

The rise of ISIS has created strange bedfellows as Iran and Saudi Arabia reluctantly share the view of ISIS an enemy. They seem to unofficially agree on how the ISIS presence in Iraq should be handled. How ISIS should be dealt with in Syria is another matter. Saudi Arabia and its partners in the U.S. led anti-ISIS coalition continue to stress that the Assad regime must go, and the coalition's plans to arm the moderate opposition are not compatible with Iran's goals. Therefore, although there are temporary overlapping interests in Iraq as long as ISIS exists, there is a risk that the fierce competition between Iran and Saudi

⁹⁵ Smyth, Philip, "Hizballah Cavalcade: Iran's losses in the '35th Province' (Syria) part 1", Jihadology, June 14, 2014, accessed: 2014-06-18

⁹⁶ BBC, Iraq conflict: Iran's Rouhani 'ready to help', June 14, 2014

⁹⁷ Alalam, "Iran to consider aiding Iraq if formally asked", June 15, 2014

⁹⁸ Filkins, Dexter, "The Shadow Commander", The New Yorker, September 30, 2013

Arabia will continue to manifest itself in Syria with serious repercussions for Iraq and wider regional stability.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter set out to discuss how the Syrian war is affecting Iraq by using ISIS as a focal point. ISIS' rise has been made possible by developments in both Syria and Iraq. ISIS owes its evolution from a small al-Qaeda group to an organization with state-like ambitions to the unresolved grievances of Iraqi society and the chaotic security vacuum in Syria. These circumstances together created fertile ground for ISIS to grow, and to function as a bridge of instability between Syria and Iraq. Now ISIS' radical sectarian ideology and aspirations of statehood pose serious risk not only to Iraq but the whole region.

The result of ISIS' sudden expansion into Iraq is that sectarianism, full scale civil war and secession now threaten the country. ISIS' successful advancement is a sign that deep-rooted grievances in Iraqi society remain unaddressed. There are parts of the population, predominantly within the Sunni community that are frustrated by poor governance and discrimination, and that support ISIS to further their own agendas. These grievances combined with the Iraqi army's limited capabilities, the disruptive influence of regional power games and the international coalition's (potential) inability to intervene decisively could mean that Iraq is facing a long-lasting conflict. The international coalition's efforts to attack ISIS through continuous airstrikes and the arming of various Iraqi actors, will probably lead to a degradation of the organization. It is too soon to know how military degradation will affect ISIS' behavior, power of attraction or even staying power in terms of its Iraqi presence. Even if ISIS is affected negatively in all these aspects, the clear emphasis of the U.S. initiated strategy on Iraq is to Iraq's detriment, because running ISIS out of Iraq will not solve the fundamental problems, nor will it defeat ISIS.

There are signs that the U.S. administration may be rethinking its strategy. In November 2014 it was reported that President Obama had asked for a new strategy that includes a plan for how to act in Syria.⁹⁹ What it would entail is not yet clear. U.S. decision makers are likely struggling to figure out how to reconcile the scale of intervention needed to shape the conditions in Syria favorably, with the reluctance of committing ground troops and becoming engulfed in another Middle Eastern war.

⁹⁹ Labott, Elise, Sources: Obama seeks new Syria strategy, CNN, November 13, 2014, accessed: 141120

It is however obvious, that since ISIS' whole strategy is based on rooting itself in both Syria and Iraq, the organization must be defeated in both countries. Otherwise ISIS can never be more than weakened, considering that it would continuously have somewhere to retreat. As previously mentioned, ISIS is determined to consolidate its hold on the conquered territories through governance. In order to establish governance, the organization embeds itself with the populations of the conquered areas. This presents an additional difficulty to anyone who wishes to defeat ISIS militarily, because it will be impossible to avoid civilian casualties. This fact may in part explain why the coalition has focused on targeting various revenue sources. It is easier to limit ISIS' financial flows than striking densely populated ISIS' strongholds.

While it may be possible to come to some sort of agreement amongst the global and regional powers on how to handle ISIS in Iraq, it has so far been impossible to do the same in regards to Syria. However, ISIS is not the root cause of the two conflicts in Syria and Iraq but rather a link between them. That leads to the conclusion that the conditions that helped produce ISIS in Syria as well as in Iraq must be targeted in order to address the ISIS threat in any real way. To beat ISIS political solutions are needed. Otherwise ISIS, or another organization like it, will continue to challenge stability in the Middle East.

3 Lebanese Hezbollah

Lebanon could be the next state to succumb to conflict. As Syria's neighbor, Lebanon is severely affected by the Syrian war, and Lebanese tensions stemming from the war have increased over the last year. The history of the two countries is closely intertwined, and there are political as well as ethnic and religious ties. One link of significance, especially in relation to the ongoing war, is made up by the Lebanese militia and political party Hezbollah. The organization is a key actor on the Syrian battlefield, and has played a substantial role in keeping the Assad regime in power. Hezbollah chose to publically acknowledge its presence in Syria for the first time on April 30, 2013, although most observers agree involvement far precedes this date.

This chapter investigates why Hezbollah has chosen to become militarily involved in Syria, how the organization justifies its involvement and what the potential implications are for Lebanese stability. It attempts to answer the question why Hezbollah has chosen to participate when it is clear that it creates enmity with political opponents in the Lebanese arena, instigates the wrath of extremist groups like the Islamic State, and stokes sectarian tension in Lebanon. In search of explanations the first part of the chapter briefly outlines in which ways Hezbollah is engaging in the conflict, what the nature of Hezbollah's alliance with Iran and Syria is, and how Hezbollah portrays its involvement in Syria to the public. The second part looks at how the Syrian war and Hezbollah's participation affects Lebanese security, Lebanese politics, and ultimately what it could mean for Lebanon's future.

3.1 Hezbollah's engagement in Syria

Hezbollah formally entered the war in Syria with the battle of Qusayr in 2013. This effectively ended Hezbollah's wait and see approach adopted during the war's first two years. Hezbollah was initially reluctant to become involved, but the decision to engage militarily was made to safeguard Hezbollah's strategic relationship with the Assad regime, and to prevent extremists from taking power in Syria. Hezbollah has since then been instrumental in keeping the regime in place.

The organization's contribution on the Syrian battlefield is closely coordinated with the Assad regime and Iran, and quite multifaceted. It "...includes logistical support, training and advising, facilitation of IRGC-QF

activity, and direct combat action.”¹⁰⁰ The acronym in the quote, IRGC-QF refers to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force. The IRGC is Iran’s most powerful military organization, and its task is to protect and promote the values of the Iranian revolution. This means in practice safeguarding the Iranian regime’s interests, and proactively countering threats to the regime’s existence. The Qods force is the Revolutionary Guard’s external branch and is thus used to protect the revolution abroad, through asymmetric warfare and in cooperation with foreign proxies. One such important proxy is Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁰¹

Hezbollah has in collaboration with Iran trained regime forces as well as the National Defence Forces (NDF),¹⁰² which is a type of voluntary National Guard.¹⁰³ Within the scope of these training efforts, Hezbollah has among other things taught urban and guerrilla warfare, and intelligence gathering. Hezbollah has both engaged in direct combat alongside the Syrian regime forces, and alongside the NDF. Hezbollah fighters have also had supervisory and commanding roles. In some instances Hezbollah has commanded Syrian officers and also operated Syrian weapons systems, and in other instances Hezbollah has been responsible for leading operations with allied Iraqi Shia militias.¹⁰⁴ Whether Hezbollah takes the lead or not has usually depended on terrain and type of operation.

The areas where Hezbollah operates are both areas which are strategically important for the Assad regime, such as Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, and border areas that are strategically important to Hezbollah’s supply lines and Lebanese security, like Qusayr and Qalamoun. Qusayr, for example, sits on one of Hezbollah’s weapons supply routes, thus maintaining control of the area is a strategic imperative.¹⁰⁵ Qalamoun has been used as a transit route for Syrian opposition fighters to get into Arsal in Lebanon, which Hezbollah views as a threat to Lebanese security.¹⁰⁶

These are just a few examples of what Hezbollah’s engagement in Syria looks like, but the most important thing to note is that the support that Hezbollah has

¹⁰⁰ Fulton, Will, Holliday, Joseph and Wyer, Sam, Iranian strategy in Syria, A joint report by AEI’s critical threats project and the Institute for the study of war, May 2013, p.21

¹⁰¹ Nader, Alireza, The Revolutionary Guards, The Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace

¹⁰² På arabiska: قوات الدفاع الوطني [quwat al-difa‘a al-watani]

¹⁰³ Fulton, Will, Holliday, Joseph and Wyer, Sam, Iranian strategy in Syria, A joint report by AEI’s critical threats project and the Institute for the study of war, May 2013, p.21

¹⁰⁴ ¹⁰⁴ Sullivan, Marisa, Hezbollah in Syria, Institute for the Study of War, April 2014, p.15

¹⁰⁵ Nerguizian, Aram, “Lebanon at the Crossroads”, Statement before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs, p. 19

¹⁰⁶ Sullivan, Marisa, Hezbollah in Syria, Institute for the Study of War, April 2014, p.15

given the Assad regime has been crucial to its survival. It is a common perception that the regime was losing the war in 2012 and what turned developments around was increased support from Iran, combined with Hezbollah's entry on the battlefield. But by doing so Hezbollah has made Lebanon more vulnerable to the neighboring conflict than it was before. That prompts the question of why Hezbollah deems safeguarding the Assad regime a risk worth taking?

3.2 The axis of resistance and its importance

The axis of resistance is an essential piece to the puzzle of understanding why Hezbollah is involved in Syria. The core members of this alliance are Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. It came to be in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution in 1979 and began as a strategic alliance between Iran and Syria based in a shared enmity towards Israel and the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq.¹⁰⁷ Syria still remains Iran's only close ally in the Middle East. Both Iran and Syria contributed to the creation of the third alliance member, Lebanese Hezbollah.

Hezbollah was formed shortly after the Iranian revolution, during the initial stages of the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in 1982-1985, with significant help from Iran's Revolutionary Guards (the IRGC) then present in the Bekaa valley. The IRGC were sent to Lebanon by then Iranian Supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini in part to export the Islamic revolution and in part to show domestically and regionally that Iran was a force to be reckoned with, even as the war with Iraq was ongoing.¹⁰⁸ A combination of the IRGC's efforts and the time being ripe for Shiite political mobilization (accelerated by Israeli transgressions in Shia areas) gave birth to Lebanese Hezbollah. Syria played an intrinsic part in the process, as the Iranian presence would not have been possible without Syrian approval.¹⁰⁹ In light of the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, Syria felt abandoned by the Arab world in its resistance towards Israel. Thus when Iran took a leading role in criticizing Israel and calling for action against its invasion of Lebanon (1982), Syria took the opportunity to create a new partnership and allowed the IRGC to operate in Lebanon via Syrian territory. Hezbollah became an instrument with which both Syria and Iran could counter Israel in an indirect manner, and it still is.

¹⁰⁷ Ranstorp, Magnus, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon the politics of the Western hostage crisis*, Macmillan Press, 1997, p.112

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p.113

¹⁰⁹ Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal, *Hizb'ullah Politics & Religion*, p.14, Pluto Press, 2002

The Syrian sponsorship of Hezbollah has also meant a possibility for Syria to preserve a channel of influence in Lebanon.¹¹⁰ In order to protect that channel as the civil war in Lebanon ended (1990), Syria continued to arm Hezbollah in disregard of the Taif agreement.¹¹¹ This made way for the peculiar dual role that Hezbollah has in Lebanon today as both a political party and an armed force. According to Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem, the rationale for maintaining this dual form is that in order to sustain the organization's main purpose, jihad against Israel, the support of a political platform is necessary.¹¹² Implicitly, this statement tells us that the armed branch is viewed as fundamental to Hezbollah.

Syria plays a crucial role as the geographic bridge between Iran and Hezbollah. Without Syria the relationship would face practical difficulties. But, this is not the whole extent of Syria's role in the alliance. Syria contributes with arms, and allows Hezbollah to train and keep weapons on Syrian territory.¹¹³ Hezbollah views the relationship with Syria as "...the cornerstone for facing major regional obligations."¹¹⁴ The organization argues that because of Lebanon's geopolitical weakness, the country needs Syria in order to resist Israel. Hezbollah therefore acts as a conduit for Syrian support. For Syria its relationships with Hezbollah and Iran are based in converging strategic interests, the Syrian secular leadership does not share Hezbollah's and Iran's ideological foundation. The connection between Iran and Hezbollah therefore is different in character, because it is both strategic and ideological.¹¹⁵

This ideological connection is visible through the fact that the current Iranian Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamene'i is acknowledged as a *marja' at-taghlid*¹¹⁶ for Hezbollah.¹¹⁷ This means that Ayatollah Khamene'i is one of the organization's main religious authorities. His religious rulings carry significant weight regarding "...strategic issues such as jihad, political rule and the

¹¹⁰ Norton, Augustus Richard (2007) The Role of Hezbollah in Lebanese Domestic Politics, *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 42:4, 475-491

¹¹¹ The Taif agreement stipulated that all armed groups in Lebanon would give up their arms. Picard;

"Hezbollah (part 1): Profile of the Lebanese Shiite Terrorist Organization of Global Reach Sponsored by Iran and Supported by Syria," *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies, Israel*, June 2003. p.58

¹¹² Qassem, Naim, *Hizbullah the story from within*, SAQI, 2005, p.80

¹¹³ Sullivan, Marisa, *Hezbollah in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, April 2014, p.10

¹¹⁴ Qassem, Naim, *Hizbullah the story from within*, SAQI, 2005, p.243

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.236

¹¹⁶ *Marja' at-taghlid* means "source of emulation" and is the title of the highest ranking cleric or religious authority within the Twelver Shia sect to which Hezbollah's members belong. *Marja' at-taghlid*, the Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2014

¹¹⁷ Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal, *Hizb'ullah Politics & Religion*, p.65, Pluto Press, 2002

classification of ‘friends and enemies’.¹¹⁸ Most importantly Khamene’i is also accepted as *wali al-faqi*,¹¹⁹ which means that he is regarded as a political authority.¹²⁰ When Hezbollah decided to enter the Lebanese political arena in 1992, it did so only after receiving Ayatollah Khamene’i’s support.¹²¹ The founding of Hezbollah is viewed as the Iranian regime’s most successful attempt to export the values of the Islamic revolution. Besides sharing a common religious and political foundation, there are financial ties between Hezbollah and Iran; Hezbollah supposedly receives funding in the realm of USD100 million yearly from the IRGC.¹²² Hence Iran’s influence over Hezbollah is considerable.

The three alliance members contribute in different ways to the resistance, but they all benefit from upholding it. According to Hezbollah, being part of an alliance with both Iran and Syria makes it possible for Hezbollah to safeguard its “...freedom of choice and individuality.”¹²³ The alliance makes it possible for Hezbollah to balance between the two. Ensuring the survival of the alliance is an important motivation for both Hezbollah’s and Iran’s decisions to support the Assad regime in the current war.

3.3 Portrayal of engagement: what does Hezbollah want?

Hezbollah portrays the Syrian war as a catalyst for two intertwined existential threats, the Israeli and the *takfiri*. Takfir means the “...pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (*kafir*) and no longer Muslim”¹²⁴ and is a term which is used by Islamic extremist groups to justify violence against Muslims of other Islamic sects, or Muslims who they view to be deviating from the righteous path. ISIS is an example of a group that Hezbollah designates as *takfiri*.

In response to these threats there are two goals that Hezbollah hopes to achieve by fighting in Syria. One is keeping the war from spreading to Lebanon, and the other is protecting the resistance against Israel. In a speech on May 25 2013 commemorating Israel’s retreat from Lebanon in 1985, Hezbollah leader Hassan

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p.67

¹¹⁹ Wali al-faqi means Jurisprudential Scholar or Guardian Jurist

¹²⁰ Hamzeh, Ahmad Nizar, In the path of Hizbullah, Syracuse University Press, 2004, p.33

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² See for example Levitt, Matthew “Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God”, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005 or Almonitor, “Hezbollah and Rouhani”, October 3, 2013

¹²³ Qassem, Naim, Hizbullah the story from within, SAQI, 2005, p.242

¹²⁴ Takfir. The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2014

Nasrallah said “If Syria falls in the hands of the Takfiris and the United States, the resistance will be trapped and Israel will enter Lebanon. If Syria falls, the Palestinian cause will be lost.”¹²⁵

This denotes a departure from the regular rhetoric that Hezbollah uses to justify its actions. Hezbollah’s greatest enemy has traditionally been Israel, not other Muslims or other Islamic ideologies. In Hezbollah’s view, the resistance, which is the organization’s original task, is a matter of “intellectual culture” that transcends sects.¹²⁶ This implies that the organization believes that its partners’ ideology is less important than the common goal, which is fighting Israel.¹²⁷ In Nasrallah’s quote Israel is also portrayed as the main threat, but indirectly through the extension of the *takfiri* presence in Syria. Thus, in the case of Syria ideology does matter. The *takfiri* threat, meaning the Sunni extremist groups currently fighting against the regime, are frequently voiced as a danger to Lebanon and the region because of their sectarian agenda.

In an interview with the Lebanese paper *as-Safir*, the Hezbollah leader outlined the dangers of having *takfiris* take power in Syria. Firstly, he believed it would mean continued civil war between the various Sunni extremist groups within Syria. Secondly these Sunni groups would be, according to Nasrallah, incapable of building state institutions. Therefore they cannot pose more than a temporary threat to Israel, in contrast to the Hezbollah-Iran-Syria axis of resistance which threatens Israel’s existence continuously. Thirdly, in lieu of prioritizing Israel as their greatest enemy, the *takfiri* groups are focused on fighting Shia actors, like Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, or Iran.¹²⁸

Nasrallah has specifically named Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS as great threats, and warned that “the speech in Syria is absolutely sectarian”.¹²⁹ He thereby implies that the *takfiri* groups are pushing the conflict in a dangerous sectarian direction. He also accused the United States, some of the Arab states and Israel of using Sunni extremist groups to wage terrorist attacks on Lebanon to fuel sectarian strife. The logic behind Nasrallah’s remark on the consequences of the fall of the Syrian regime is that he sees a connection between the *takfiri* threat and the Israeli. Lebanon is very sensitive to the kind of sectarian conflict that is spilling over from Syria, if increased this spillover has the potential to cause another

¹²⁵ Rida, Nour, “Sayyed Nasrallah: I promise you victory again”, *Al-Ahed News*, May 25, 2013

¹²⁶ *Al-Ahed news*, “Sayyed Nasrallah’s Full Speech at Launch of Jabal Amel Forum on March 29, 2014”, March 29, 2014, accessed: 2014-06-02

¹²⁷ Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal, *Hizb’ullah Politics & Religion*, p.112, Pluto Press, 2002

¹²⁸ *Alahednews*, “Sayyed Nasrallah’s Speech on 16 February 2014-- Leader Martyrs Anniversary“, February 16, 2014, accessed: 2014-06-02

¹²⁹ *Alahednews*, “Sayyed Nasrallah’s Speech on 16 February 2014-- Leader Martyrs Anniversary“, February 16, 2014, accessed: 2014-06-02

Lebanese civil war. If another civil war is ignited, then according to Nasrallah, Israel would take the chance to influence Lebanon just as it did during the 1980's.¹³⁰ Nasrallah therefore argues that the prevalence of sectarian violence in Lebanon stemming from the conflict in Syria gives Hezbollah the right to fight in Syria pre-emptively.¹³¹ By this logic, keeping sectarianism at bay also serves to keep Israel at arm's length. By connecting the Syrian war to the resistance against Israel, Hezbollah's presence in Syria becomes legitimate. It is not possible to know if this is simple rhetoric intended to gather support for the goal of preserving the Assad regime, or if this is a true representation of what the Hezbollah leadership believes. Most likely it is a mix of both, the concern that the Syrian war could lead to Israeli dominance over Lebanon probably mirrors Hezbollah's worst case scenario, while also serving as a rallying cry.

Thus to sum up, according to Hezbollah, its aim in Syria is keeping the war out of Lebanon, defeating the *takfiris* thereby stemming sectarianism, and preserving the resistance, thereby keeping the struggle towards Israel alive. Maintaining the resistance against Israel is Hezbollah's first priority,¹³² and also its main source of legitimacy. Much effort is put into framing Hezbollah's engagement within a sectarian context, but a real practical concern for Hezbollah is that Syria could come out of the war not as one state but several fragments. If Syria were partitioned it would be crucial that a geographic connection to Lebanon can be maintained. If the Syrian regime falls, Hezbollah would be geographically cut off from its allies, and the resistance would literally be trapped in Lebanon.

3.4 Fighting sectarianism with sectarianism

It is unlikely that Hezbollah is able to fight in Syria without adding to the sectarian polarization of the war. Because, Hezbollah is a military actor with a distinct foundation in Shia ideology and remains a symbol of the Shia resistance movement initiated by Iran. Pragmatic cooperation with non-Shia groups on the goal of defeating Israel is possible from Hezbollah's point of view; the resistance axis has for example supported Hamas, which is a Sunni organization.

But this philosophy is less applicable to Syria. For most other actors in Syria, the future of Syria and the future of Palestine are two separate issues. For them the war has nothing to do with resistance against Israel. Hezbollah opponents on the ground in Syria like ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra do not overlook that Hezbollah is driven by "a religious legal obligation... to wage a defensive jihad, in the cause

¹³⁰ Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal, *Hizb'ullah Politics & Religion*, p.22, Pluto Press, 2002

¹³¹ Hashem, Ali, "Nasrallah: Hezbollah has 'right' to wage 'pre-emptive war' in Syria, *Al-Monitor*, February 17, 2014

¹³² Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal, *Hizb'ullah Politics & Religion*, p.112, Pluto Press, 2002

of God.”¹³³ They themselves are motivated by similar sentiments, and they strongly oppose Hezbollah’s version of Islam. By taking part in the war Hezbollah has made Lebanon a target for retaliation from these groups. In addition it is likely that Hezbollah’s rhetoric which is intended to rally support for its participation among its own supporters, also fuels resentment towards the organization among its opponents.

Judging by the language that the Hezbollah leadership, Hezbollah fighters and their Iranian partners use to portray the conflict in Syria, they are essentially instigating sectarianism by fighting sectarianism. One example is how participating in the battle in Syria often is referred to as ‘defending Zeynab’. This is a phrase that Nasrallah has used frequently and refers to the Sayyida Zeynab shrine in Damascus. The defence of Zeynab is not only figurative. In some cases Hezbollah fighters have literally guarded the shrine.¹³⁴ There is strategic logic behind that, because controlling the area where the shrine is situated is critical to defending Damascus.¹³⁵

The shrine has great symbolic value and is a holy site for Shiites as it hosts the grave of Zeynab, an important person in Shia Islam.¹³⁶ The reason Zeynab holds a special place in Shiites’ hearts, besides being the prophet’s granddaughter, is that she survived the battle of Karbala.¹³⁷ The battle of Karbala and the killing of Zeynab’s brother Hossein¹³⁸ (by birth the rightful Caliph according to Shiites) was a watershed moment in the history of Islam which solidified the division between the Shia and Sunni branches.¹³⁹

A report from the Israeli Meir Amit Intelligence and Terror Information Center argues that the main motivation for foreign Shia fighters to join the war in Syria

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Barnard, Anne and Mourtada, Hania, “Rocket and Gun Attacks Add to Fears That Syria’s Strife Is Reaching Lebanon”, the New York Times, May 28, 2013

¹³⁵ Fulton, Will, Holliday, Joseph and Wyer, Sam, Iranian strategy in Syria, A joint report by AEI’s critical threats project and the Institute for the study of war, May 2013, p.25

¹³⁶ Zeynab was the Prophet Mohammad’s granddaughter, her father Ali was the prophet Mohammad’s cousin. Ali was considered by those who formed the Shia branch of Islam to be the righteous successor to the caliphate after Mohammad’s death. He became the fourth caliph of Sunni Islam, and the first Imam of Shia Islam.

¹³⁷ *Umayyad caliph who sent forces against Husayn and his followers in Karbala, Iraq, in 680, resulting in their martyrdom. Personification of evil and oppression for Shiis. In the twentieth century the Husayn/Yazid paradigm was used to describe the relationship between the oppressed Iranian people and the Pahlavi regime, and between the oppressed Shiis of Lebanon and the landlords, state, and police. Yazid.* The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2014

¹³⁸ Hossein and Zeynab were the prophet Mohammad’s grandchildren. According to Shia Islam Hossein was the third Shia Imam preceded by his father Ali, and brother Hassan.

¹³⁹ Lapidus, Ira M., A History of Islamic Societies, 2002, 49

is religious.¹⁴⁰ There is ample material in social media of Shia fighters from Hezbollah, Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran portraying their participation in the war in sectarian terms. For example, there are numerous images from funerals where Shia fighters are laid to rest and celebrated for becoming martyrs defending the shrine¹⁴¹ (martyrdom can only be obtained if a person dies while carrying out his or her religious duty).¹⁴² The video footage of Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander Esmail Heydari, where he speaks of himself and his fellow men in the Syrian National Defence Forces as belonging to the “front of justice” and their opponents as part of the “front of Satan”, is yet another case in point.¹⁴³

3.5 Implications for Lebanese security

Lebanese security is clearly affected by the war in Syria, this was the case before Hezbollah announced its participation in the war, but has worsened after. It is clear that Hezbollah’s decision has caused reactions. During 2013 Lebanese Salafist Sheikhs in Tripoli and Sidon called for jihad in defense of Sunnis in Syria.¹⁴⁴ It is a known fact that Lebanese Sunnis have joined the war across the border in Syria, but there is no reliable data on how many they are. One Salafi sheikh reportedly said that he would revoke his call for jihad once Hezbollah agrees to leave Syria.¹⁴⁵ Lebanese Salafi groups have “...given shared ideology and animosity toward Hezbollah...welcomed the expansion of groups tied to Al-Qaeda in Lebanon, including the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)”.¹⁴⁶

Increased sectarian violence is one of the most serious spillover effects that Lebanon has to contend with. The country is mainly witnessing two types of violence; street clashes between supporters of Hezbollah and supporters of the Syrian opposition, and organized attacks by militants against specific targets,

¹⁴⁰ Meir Amit Intelligence and Terror Information Center, Shiite foreign fighters in Syria, March 18, 2014, 32

¹⁴¹ Hezbollah Cavalcade at Jihadology follows this issue, See also ; Arash Karami, “Hard-line Iran website publishes names of fighters killed in Syria”, Almonitor, January 31, 2014

¹⁴² Martyr. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 2014

¹⁴³ Video footage can be found on an Iranian facebook page dedicated to Shia martyrs in the Syrian war called [برای دفاع از حرم حضرت زینب میخوایم بریم سوریه] [bara-ye defa’a az haram-e hazrat-e zeynab mikhaym berim Sooriye] freely translated it means “We are going to Syria to protect the Shrine of Zeynab”

¹⁴⁴ Alami, Mona, *The Impact of the Syria conflict on Salafis and Jihadis in Lebanon*, Middle East Institute, April 18, 2014

¹⁴⁵ Corbeil, Alexander, *The Syrian Conflict and Sunni Radicalism in Lebanon*, January 9, 2014

¹⁴⁶ Nerguizian, Aram, “Lebanon at the Crossroads”, Statement before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs p. 23

such as suicide bombings. For example in Tripoli reoccurring clashes between Sunnis and Alawites who support different sides in the war have caused many deaths.¹⁴⁷ During a renewed round of fighting in March 2014 at least thirty people were killed. Following the March clashes the Lebanese government approved a security plan for Tripoli. Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) troops have had great difficulties in enforcing the plan and have been accused of targeting Sunnis.¹⁴⁸

There has been a number of suicide bombings prompted by Hezbollah's engagement. They have been carried out by Sunni Salafi groups like the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS leaving many victims in their wake.¹⁴⁹ Among the targets are ordinary citizens in Shia majority neighborhoods, Hezbollah check points, the Iranian embassy, and the Iranian cultural center in Beirut. Many attempted bombings have been averted by Lebanese authorities. There have also been a number of rocket attacks against border towns in Eastern Lebanon for which ISIS has claimed responsibility.¹⁵⁰

It is believed that the targeting of Shiites is part of a campaign aimed to lessen the support for Hezbollah's engagement in Syria. In June 2014 following ISIS' surprise offensive in Iraq, Lebanon saw an increase of ISIS-connected attacks. The most serious to date was the attack on Aarsal in Northeastern Lebanon, according to Lebanese media by militants from various groups including ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in early August 2014. Aarsal is close to the border with Syria and the Syrian town Qusayr where Hezbollah has been heavily involved in fighting against the Syrian opposition. The attack which lasted five days was prompted according to some reports by the arrest of ISIS ally Fajr al-Islam commander Imad Jomaa.¹⁵¹ Seemingly doubtful of this interpretation, the Lebanese Army Commander General Kahwaji has said that the attack was very well planned and executed in collaboration with people inside the refugee camps around Aarsal.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Barnard, Anne, "Battle for Syrian town spurs sectarian fighting in northern Lebanon", May 24, 2013

Saad, Hwaida, "In Lebanese city, Fighting over Syria conflict is deadly", June 2, 2012, The New York Times

¹⁴⁸ The Daily Star, "Rifi calls for security plan reforms", July 27, 2014

¹⁴⁹ Almonitor, "Suicide attack targets Shiite town in Lebanon", February 2, 2014, The Daily Star, "ISIS claims responsibility for Beirut car bomb", January 5, 2014

¹⁵⁰ Alakhbar, "ISIS renews rocket attacks on East Lebanon", March 7, 2014

¹⁵¹ Al-Fakih, Rakan, and Al-Sohl, Nidal, "Militants begin withdrawal from Aarsal", The Daily Star, August 7, 2014

¹⁵² The Daily Star, "Kahwaji says militant attack in Aarsal was premeditated", August 4, 2014

In response to the LAF's operation in Aarsal, unrest spread again to Tripoli and caused clashes there as well. Ultimately a cease fire was negotiated, but the clashes caused several deaths on both sides. Around 35 LAF soldiers and Lebanese policemen were taken hostage, some were released and so far two have been executed. Some of the hostages are held by ISIS and some by Jabhat al-Nusra. In exchange ISIS demanded the release of a number of prisoners from Roumieh prison in Beirut. Jabhat al-Nusra demanded Hezbollah's retreat from Qalamoun, and underlined the sectarian dimension of the ongoing struggle by threatening to primarily kill their Shia hostages unless their demands were met.¹⁵³

In a speech held May 25, 2014, preceding the events in Aarsal, Nasrallah urged the Lebanese who have disagreements over the war in Syria to take their grievances there and to not fight each other inside Lebanon.¹⁵⁴ Following his advice and keeping the fighting in Syria has become increasingly difficult. The reoccurring suicide bombings and continuous clashes are proof that the sectarianism that Hezbollah is struggling to keep out of Lebanon is there, and tensions are rising. The Hezbollah leadership must be aware of this, but it can only be assumed that they perceive that participating in the war instead of letting the Assad regime fall is the better of two difficult approaches. The question for the future is whether Hezbollah's gamble ultimately will lead to a containment of the sectarian tension in Lebanon, or if the developments in Syria and Iraq will make Lebanon succumb to widespread violence as well. Considering the weakness of the Lebanese state the stakes are high. Hezbollah continues to argue that its actions in Syria are proactive, and will ultimately produce less instability in Lebanon, not more.

By fighting in Syria, Hezbollah has turned into a different creature. It is not just a resistance movement anymore, and it is alienating its non-Shia supporters who do not share its support for the Assad regime.¹⁵⁵ The use of derogatory terms like *takfiri* regarding various Sunni groups (and by association people who support the rebel side in the war) puts emphasis on the sectarian dimension, and is contributing to domestic tensions in Lebanon. It is clear that there is a political mobilization of more radical Lebanese Sunnis prompted by Hezbollah's actions, and the rise of the Sunni opposition in Syria. The conditions of poverty and marginalization among Sunnis in northern Lebanon are creating a similar

¹⁵³ Human Rights Watch, Lebanon/IS: Soldier Beheading a War Crime if Confirmed, Sarah Leah Witson,

¹⁵⁴ Al-Ahed news, "Sayyed Nasrallah's Full Speech on Resistance and Liberation Day – May 25, 2014", May 29, 2014

¹⁵⁵ Nerguizian, Aram "Lebanon at the Crossroads", Statement before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs p. 21

situation to the early 1970's, which mobilized the Lebanese Shia and gave life to Hezbollah.¹⁵⁶

In addition to the violent spillover, the war's strain on Lebanon's economy and social sector is significant. According to UNHCR the number of refugees is expected to reach 1,5 million by the end of 2014, i.e. one third of Lebanon's total population has refugee status.¹⁵⁷ In April 2014, UNHCR in Lebanon registered 2500 Syrian refugees a day.¹⁵⁸ The increasing presence of Syrian refugees is creating anger in the host communities as refugees compete with Lebanese workers on the labor market, and are willing to work for lower pay.¹⁵⁹ There is also a perception among the poor in Lebanon that the refugees receive governmental help that should be going to them instead.¹⁶⁰ Since the beginning of the conflict, government expenditures have increased in order to meet the needs of the refugees, while economic growth has decreased significantly.¹⁶¹

3.6 Implications for Lebanese politics

The political context is key to understanding how Hezbollah's engagement in Syria affects the internal political dynamic in Lebanon. Lebanon is a religiously plural society where 18 confessions coexist, but the largest religious groups are Shia Muslims, Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims and Druze.¹⁶² After suffering a 15 year long sectarian civil war,¹⁶³ Lebanese society is still inherently polarized due to its complex political model¹⁶⁴ which allocates power on a sectarian basis. Various confessional models have been in place since the national pact in 1943, but the post-civil war version does not favor the Maronite Christian elite above others, which previously was the case.¹⁶⁵ Religious identity is thus very important in Lebanon, and the design for power sharing ensures that it will remain so. After the civil war, religious communalism was the main tangible factor to base the political system on, as there was only a very weak common

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ UNHCR, Lebanon Country Report, 2014

¹⁵⁸ UNHCR Press release, Lebanon faces intensifying spillover; host communities stretched to breaking point, April 3, 2014

¹⁵⁹ "Syria war, refugees add to Lebanon's economic crisis", Almonitor

¹⁶⁰ ILO, Assessment of the Impact of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and their employment profile 2013, p.36

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p.34

¹⁶² CIA World Factbook, Lebanon

¹⁶³ 1975-1990

¹⁶⁴ Based on the idea of consociational democracy by scholar Arend Lijphart

¹⁶⁵ Picard, Elizabeth, Post-war Lebanese communities in search of reconciliation, *Religionen im Konflikt*, V. Makrides & J. Rüpke (Ed.) (2005)

Lebanese identity. The secular elites were exchanged for religious, with the consequence that all political disagreements have a sectarian flavor, and “their solution implicitly involves the victory of one community over another...”¹⁶⁶

Despite its obvious flaws, the system is deemed preferable to one based on majority rule, because of the heterogeneous nature of Lebanese society. With a majority rule system, the largest group, the Lebanese Shiites, would have the upper hand. The current political model is an emergency solution, and a great compromise that constantly subjects political decision making to “sectarian strangleholds”.¹⁶⁷ This essentially causes a weak state, which has great difficulty of making and implementing decisions. The model perpetuates Lebanon’s susceptibility to sectarian tensions. But, considering that this emergency solution was put in place as a pre-emptive measure against further civil war, it should not be regarded as completely dysfunctional. So far, it seems that it has prevented a civil war relapse despite the threats emanating from the Syrian conflict.

The existence of Hezbollah’s armed branch and the legacy of the Syrian presence in Lebanon after the civil war contribute to the polarization of Lebanese society. Support for or against Syrian (and Iranian) influence in Lebanese politics is an important divider, and this translates into support for or against the Syrian regime in the current war. Underlining the significance of Syria to Lebanese politics, the two main political blocs have names that relate to Syria. The Lebanese anti-Syria bloc is called the March 14 coalition (March 14 being the first day of the Cedar revolution which aimed to drive Syria out of Lebanon). This bloc is made up of mainly Sunni and Christian parties. It has close ties to Saudi Arabia, and is a staunch proponent of disarming Hezbollah. It views Hezbollah as a conduit for unwanted Syrian and Iranian influence. The bloc’s main political opponents are part of the pro-Syrian March 8 coalition (which got its name from the date of a Beirut demonstration in tribute of the Syrian troops for helping Lebanon to end the civil war). This coalition is made up mainly by Hezbollah, which is predominantly a Shia party and the Free Patriotic Movement which is Christian.

Hezbollah’s decision to fight in Syria has increased the rift between the March 8 and March 14 coalitions, and is a great source of criticism towards the organization. In June 2012 the Lebanese government put forth the Baabda declaration, clarifying that Lebanon should remain neutral in regards to Syria. Hezbollah although a signatory, acted in breach of the declaration when it entered the conflict.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p12

¹⁶⁷ Makdisi, Samir and Marktanner, Marcus “Trapped by Consociationalism: the Case of Lebanon”, American University of Beirut, 2009, p.3

Hezbollah's actions in Syria serve as political ammunition in the power struggle between the March 8 and March 14 coalitions. The Future Movement (a party within the March 14 coalition) has for example stated that "the continuity of Hezbollah's involvement in the battle for Syria is behind Lebanon's terrorism problem..."¹⁶⁸ This statement although simplistic and non-conclusive, has some merit to it. Hezbollah's engagement in the war draws attention to the organization from extremist groups on the opposing side. Political effects of Hezbollah's choice to fight in Syria are renewed demands inside Lebanon for disarming Hezbollah and the failure to elect a new president.

The impact on the presidential election goes back to the Lebanese political model. In Lebanon executive power is divided between three offices, the president, the prime minister and the speaker of parliament. The presidential post is earmarked for the Christian Maronites, the Prime Minister post for the Sunnis and the speaker post for the Shias. While the idea for dividing the offices in this manner is to enforce power sharing between the sects it also comes with practical political difficulties. The presidential office is elected by the National Assembly, and is in practice a consensus decision which requires a consensus candidate.¹⁶⁹

Tensions between the two coalitions have made it very difficult to find a candidate to agree on. Both coalitions want a president beneficial to their interests. In the March 14 coalition's case that means someone who will stand behind the Baabda declaration, and Lebanese neutrality towards the Syrian war. In Hezbollah's and the March 8 coalition's case it means someone who is sympathetic to the armed struggle against Israel, the existence of Hezbollah's armed branch and thereby its efforts in Syria. In the absence of such a candidate some March 8 parliamentarians have refrained from voting, making a decisive referendum impossible. A candidate must receive two thirds of the votes to win. In 2014, 17 referendums have been held without result.¹⁷⁰ This illustrates why it is impossible for the Lebanese state to have a coherent policy regarding the war in Syria.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter set out to explain why Hezbollah became involved in the Syrian conflict, and what this involvement could mean for Lebanon. Hezbollah argues that it is acting in Lebanon's best interest. At first glance, Hezbollah's choice

¹⁶⁸ The Daily Star, "Future: Hezbollah brought terror to Lebanon", June 25, 2014

¹⁶⁹ Fakhoury, Tamirace, Lebanon's 2014 Presidential elections: when local and regional power arenas collide,

¹⁷⁰ The Daily Star, "Lebanon presidential election postponed to Jan. 28.", January 7, 2015, accessed: 2015-01-09

might seem strange because of the polarizing effect that Syrian politics has on Lebanese society. It is most likely that the Hezbollah leadership was aware that its participation in the war would cause anger and instability inside Lebanon. Thus, Hezbollah's strategy to aid the Assad regime appears to be one of calculated risk with the goal to safeguard the resistance against Israel. Mobilizing support around Shia identity trumped the negative impact on Lebanese unity. For Hezbollah, the Syrian conflict is simply existential.

Helping the Assad regime is a question of necessity, and the uprising in Syria has put Hezbollah in a very awkward position. It was not a viable option to do nothing and risk losing a strategic ally. If Hezbollah refrained from entering the war it could possibly have to deal with either a West-oriented, or a *takfiri* government in Syria. The war is inescapably a domestic issue in Lebanon, complicated by the fact that Hezbollah is both a political party and a military organization which has both the political and military power necessary to take its own path. Hezbollah's choice to fight in Syria goes against the Baabda declaration and makes a coherent Lebanese policy regarding the war impossible. Hezbollah's political opponents, the March 14 coalition are closely allied to Saudi Arabia which supports the Syrian opposition, and would thus prefer it if the Assad regime fell. Hezbollah's argument that it is fighting in Syria in order to keep war out of Lebanon is controversial, considering that sectarian violence is increasing in Lebanon.

Radical political mobilization in Lebanon is becoming more prevalent, and the opposing sides may be heading towards a future confrontation where ordinary citizens could become collateral damage. The worst case scenario is another civil war fueled by the wars in Iraq and Syria. There is research that argues that in multi-ethnic societies who experience civil war grievances rarely are motivated by ethnicity or religion, but by economic inequality.¹⁷¹ Ethnic or sectarian diversity can be an indirect cause of civil war, if there is prevalent discrimination leading to skewed income distribution or a weak state. This line of research leaves out the importance of ideology, which plays a role in civil wars instrumentally and normatively.

Ideology is a strategic instrument for guiding decisions and to attract recruits. If there is a normative commitment to the chosen ideology, the ideology will have a constraining effect on the actions of the actors, such as dictating how and when violence is used and against whom. Ideology serves the important purpose of justifying certain actions.¹⁷² Hezbollah's increasingly sectarian rhetoric should

¹⁷¹ Fearon, James and Laitin, David. Ethnicity, insurgency and civil war, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97 no. 1, February 2003, 75-90

¹⁷² Gutierrez Sanin, Francisco and Wood, Elizabeth Jean. Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond, *Journal of Peace Research*, March 2014, vol. 51 no. 2, 213-226

be seen in this light. The Hezbollah leadership has asked its troops to fight for a strategic goal, which is to protect the Assad regime. Since Hezbollah is a religious organization at the core, its supporters and fighters are more likely to be motivated by the ideological and violent threat posed by *takfiris* fighting against Assad than the preservation of Assad as Syria's leader. Without ideological conviction it is unlikely that the Hezbollah fighters would be prepared to lose their lives for the Assad regime.

While Hezbollah's choice to aid the regime serves a very important purpose for the organization on the strategic level, there is a danger that Hezbollah's ideological stance, and actions on the battlefield could turn the *takfiri* threat towards Lebanon into a self-fulfilling prophecy. There are already signs of this taking place. Hezbollah epitomizes the type of organization and the type of beliefs that for example ISIS would like to eradicate from the Middle East. ISIS' progression in Syria and Iraq shows that *takfiri* groups can pose a real threat to the region. Ironically, this also serves Hezbollah, Iran and the Assad regime, because the threat they have mobilized around has become reality.

For a country like Lebanon where there is a strong focus on religious identity, the increasing sectarian violence, and ISIS' progress in Syria and Iraq should be quite worrisome. On top of the ideological rifts, there is economic inequality, an impotent sectarian political system, polarizing sentiments and violent spillover. All are identified as risk factors conducive to civil war. Following the expansion of conflict from Syria to Iraq the region is in a precarious situation. Perhaps Lebanon most of all, due to the unpredictability of regional developments and the potential interaction with underlying tensions in Lebanese society.

There are many problems to address in order to avoid Lebanon being dragged deeper into the conflicts of the region. Ensuring political stability and that there is a functioning government is a key aspect which currently is lacking. The war in Syria has highlighted the regional dimension of the polarized political climate. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are attempting to assert influence over their allies in Lebanon. Their tug of war adds to the political divide that is already there. According to F. Gregory Gause there is a new Middle East cold war, which "...plays out in the domestic political systems of the region's weak states".¹⁷³ Aside from Iraq and Syria, Lebanon is the primary arena for Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In late 2013 Saudi Arabia, which has close relations with Sunni factions in Lebanon, made a commitment to finance an arms deal between Lebanon and France to the amount of USD3 billion.¹⁷⁴ After the Aarsal attacks in 2014, aid

¹⁷³ Gause, F. Gregory, Beyond Sectarianism: the New Middle East Cold War, Brookings, 2014

¹⁷⁴ Abu Najm, Michel, "Lebanon, France finalize \$3 billion arms deal: report", Asharq Al-Awsat, February 27, 2014

worth another USD billion was pledged to the LAF.¹⁷⁵ These deals are motivated by the Syrian war and its spillover effects, but also meant to balance Hezbollah which regularly receives funding and weapons from Iran. Iran has been less specific in its offerings towards the Lebanese Armed Forces, but offered security assistance to fight terrorism in the form of “weapons, equipment and training...”¹⁷⁶

Among Lebanese analysts there is a common thought that rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia would have positive effects on Lebanese stability. This is due to the amount of influence these countries have over the two main political coalitions in Lebanon. The Lebanese politician Walid Jumblatt called Iran and Saudi Arabia two of the most important voters in Lebanon’s presidential election,¹⁷⁷ which to date is an unresolved issue. In the same vein, speaker and Hezbollah ally Nabih Berri said that improved relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia could lead to breakthroughs on Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. This is probably true, and it is likely in the interest of both Iran and Saudi Arabia to get rid of ISIS. There is a small chance that the strategic threat that ISIS poses could create some common ground between Iran and Saudi Arabia that in turn could translate into bolstering stability in Lebanon. This hinges on whether the March 8 and 14 coalitions and their regional backers Iran and Saudi Arabia recognize the fragile situation Lebanon is in, and if the situation is incentive enough to bridge the ideological gap between the two sides. When Saudi and Iranian officials met to discuss regional developments in August 2014,¹⁷⁸ a first small step towards rapprochement was taken. But, setting differences aside to address the ISIS threat will not be enough in the long term. Although unrealistic, putting an end to the so called regional cold war would mean a real contribution to stability. If nothing is done there is a risk that Lebanon like Iraq and Syria, could succumb to conflict.

¹⁷⁵ Reuters, “Lebanon ceasefire falters; Saudi offers \$1 billion to army”, August 6, 2014

¹⁷⁶ Khalife, Marlene, “Iran envoy offers security assistance to Lebanon”, As-Safir, July 3, 2014

¹⁷⁷ Asharq al-Awsat, “Jumblatt: Iran, Saudi Arabia main voters in Lebanese presidential elections,” May 15, 2014

¹⁷⁸ Moghtader, Michelle, “Iranian minister says Saudi talks 'constructive'”, Reuters, August 26, 2014

4 Concluding remarks

This report started out by asking the question of how ISIS' and Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war affects their countries of origin Iraq and Lebanon and what the potential future consequences could be to the stability of these countries. With a growing risk of Syria and Iraq breaking up, and increasing instability in Lebanon, it becomes clear that sectarianism and regional rivalry are two central interlinked themes that contribute to the regional turmoil and its further development. These dynamics are difficult to reverse, and the conflicts difficult to solve. The region will remain fraught by instability for the foreseeable future. Any attempt at turning events around will require decisive action and serious commitment by all the regional actors as well as the international community.

4.1 ISIS, Hezbollah and sectarianism

At the beginning of the year 2015, it is evident that the conflicts are increasingly sectarian in character. The conflicts in Syria and Iraq demonstrate the danger of exploiting sectarian sentiments as a force of mobilization to realize or protect geopolitical interests. Popular discontent in both Syria and Iraq is rooted in non-religious factors like bad governance, lack of political freedoms, and skewed income distribution. However, the participation of sectarian organizations like ISIS and Hezbollah in the wars destabilizes the wider Middle East. This conclusion is strengthened as there are reports of Hezbollah advisors training Iraqi militias to fight ISIS in Iraq.¹⁷⁹ Thus the ISIS and Hezbollah face-off, which began in Syria, and continued to Lebanon, also takes place in Iraq.

ISIS and Hezbollah are fighting for different reasons. ISIS has made use of the power vacuum in eastern Syria to empower itself, and to realize its goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate in the region. Hezbollah fights to protect its strategic relationship with the Syrian regime and Iran, while also allegedly protecting Lebanon from being affected by spillover from the war. *Takfiri* organizations like ISIS are their enemy number one.

ISIS and Hezbollah have played different, but significant roles in the complex developments now unfolding. Hezbollah has made it possible for the Assad regime to hold on to power, and ISIS is responsible for reigniting Iraq's civil war. The obvious common denominator is that both actors feed the regional spiral of violence. Besides their actual use of violence, a contributing factor is

¹⁷⁹ Blanford, Nicholas, "Why Hezbollah is playing a smaller role in this Iraqi conflict", The Christian Science Monitor, July 16, 2014, accessed: 2014-11-14

that both organizations legitimize their actions through sectarian ideology. Mainly targeting each other's respective ideologies, both organizations mobilize supporters and fighters around religion. This is effective and dangerous because Lebanon, Syria and Iraq are among the most ethnically and religiously plural countries in the Middle East. While Lebanon has seen spillover and an increase of sectarian violence since the war in Syria began, it is difficult to say if these developments are a direct result of Hezbollah's actions in Syria or not, but it is plausible. In some cases there is a clear correlation, like Jabhat al-Nusra's kidnapping of LAF soldiers, where the condition for releasing them was Hezbollah's retreat from Qalamoun.

Lebanon is at risk of becoming the next victim of war in the region due to a combination of internal discontent and polarization over the Syrian conflict. But it is important to point out that although Lebanon's sectarian difficulties in some ways are similar to those of Iraq and Syria, Lebanon has a political system that sets it apart. The Lebanese political system is far from perfect. Some would say it is barely functional due to the reoccurring political deadlocks. But, the flipside is that the system ensures that coalition building is the basis to political decisions, and therefore political decision making is a slow process. This may hold the answer to why Lebanon has been able to resist being engulfed by war so far. However, a major flaw is that Hezbollah's role as a powerful military and a political actor has made it possible for the organization to digress from political consensus decisions, such as the Baabda declaration. This in itself adds to the polarization of Lebanese society. The Hezbollah leadership argues that its engagement in Syria is what is keeping the war away. As the economic and sectarian strains on Lebanon are becoming increasingly significant, it is reasonable to question how long Lebanon will be able to resist war if the conflicts in Syria and Iraq continue.

4.2 Regional rivalry and ISIS

The susceptibility to regional influence is something that ties Lebanon, Syria and Iraq together. They are all arenas for the regional cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. ISIS has successfully established itself as a third party outside of this dynamic, adding to the already complex regional situation. One possibly constructive angle to ISIS' emergence on the scene is that essentially all regional countries agree that ISIS is a threat. Concerning Iraq there is pragmatic acceptance among the regional countries for the U.S. led strategy to deal with ISIS. Concerning Syria consensus does not come as easily because the U.S. strategy includes arming and training elements of the Syrian opposition. Airstrikes against ISIS is however likely to benefit the Syrian regime and its backers, Iran and Hezbollah. ISIS' success has in a way also served the Assad regime, which from the outset wished to portray itself as a bastion against

Islamic terrorism. Now, just as Assad wished for, his regime seems like a stable alternative next to ISIS' excessively violent organization.

It is logical, and even required of the U.S.-led coalition to attack ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, in order to deprive it of a safe haven. However, the other component of the strategy; arming, equipping and training moderate rebels in Syria, the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq, the Iraqi army, and an Iraqi Sunni national guard is conducive to great risk. But it is probably the only alternative when there is no political will among the coalition members to commit ground troops.

The international community's indecisive handling of the war in Syria has contributed to ISIS' progress in establishing the caliphate. The UN Security Council deadlock made any UN sanctioned military course of action in Syria impossible. The other option was to provide the Syrian opposition with arms and funds. However, the support of the Free Syrian Army was not enough to tip the balance on the battlefield in its favor. Iran and Hezbollah's effective support to Assad frustrated countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Jordan. They opted to directly support their preferred factions within the opposition, and in some cases non-FSA groups that proved more effective. This development undermined the FSA and its Supreme Military Council.¹⁸⁰ The competing agendas of the donors have made it impossible for the military opposition to work effectively. The continuous practice of supporting a vast spectrum of militant groups of which some are at odds with one another has led to a war with multiple fronts in Syria. It is this environment that enabled ISIS to grow strong.

With the renewed ambition to arm the moderate opposition in Syria, the question arises how a repeat performance of these developments can be avoided. There is an obvious risk that arming parts of the opposition will fuel the conflict further, considering that the regional support of both sides is likely to continue.

In Iraq the dynamic is different but equally precarious. The three main segments of the population, the Shias, the Sunnis and the Kurds have serious issues to deal with before there can be any political stability in the country. The Sunnis want more political and economic influence, the Kurds want independence and the Shia-dominated central government would like to stop the Kurds from breaking away, and for the Kurds to give up the oil rich province of Kirkuk that they gained control over following ISIS' offensive. The risk in arming these actors lies in the fact that their grievances have no real connection to ISIS. ISIS is a symptom of problems that already exist. ISIS' offensive was made possible because these grievances are there. There is no doubt that if ISIS is severely

¹⁸⁰ Interview in Istanbul, with Syrian National Council representative, April 2014

weakened it will mean an acute relief for many Iraqis, but it will not be the answer to Iraq's fundamental issues.

4.3 The international community's role

Addressing the ISIS threat in itself is not enough. Defeating ISIS means eliminating the conditions that made its growth and success possible. The international community must shoulder responsibility and increase efforts to find political solutions in both Syria and Iraq. One of the main obstacles is the enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia. But, perhaps their converging interests on ISIS will constitute a golden opportunity to mend fences and improve relations. With regards to Syria excluding Iran and Hezbollah from negotiations and maintaining that the Assad regime must go could be two tenets for the international community to reassess.

What are the consequences of the international community's inability to act? The obvious consequence is that more violence is to be expected. In Syria, this will mean a continuation of the war with more casualties added to the 200 000 that already died, and possibly a partition of the country. In Iraq there is a great risk of disintegration into an IS/Sunni part, a Kurdish part and a Shia part. None of this will happen without severe violence. It is also possible that ISIS could further ignite sectarian violence in Iraq and the region. The looming threat beyond the violence and deaths is not only several failed states but also unprecedented refugee flows. The international community has to produce results in order to strengthen its tarnished legitimacy in the moderate Muslim world.

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ISIS and Hezbollah are two of the most significant actors involved in the war in Syria. This report explores what motivates ISIS' and Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict and how that involvement affects their countries of origin, Iraq and Lebanon.

When juxtaposing these actors one finds that they are active on opposite sides of the battlefield, they are both Islamist but with opposing ideologies, and they use each other's existence to legitimize their own participation in the war. Hezbollah's support has been instrumental to keeping the Assad regime in power, and ISIS is threatening to redraw the regional map with its ambitions to establish an Islamic caliphate.

The report illustrates that both actors are drivers of sectarianism and that their roles as active stakeholders in the Syrian conflict have progressed as a result of regional rivalry, mainly between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This in turn has serious consequences for Iraq and Lebanon. Iraq has already succumbed to war, and as tensions increase, Lebanon could be next in line.