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Syrian Civil War and the ISIS Crisis

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Abstract:

In 2011, the Arab Spring spread to Syria as Syrians protested Bashar Al-Assad's dictatorial regime. This societal unrest, combined with the emergence of ISIS, has led to one of the worst humanitarian crises Syria has faced. The UNHCR reports that there have been around 470,000 civilian deaths since the beginning of the war. This paper seeks to understand the motivations of the major players involved in this conflict and asksto what extent Western intervention fueled the emergence of ISIS. Additionally, it explores possible resolutions the United Nations can develop to alleviate the catastrophe that is unfolding in Syria. This will be done through an in-depth analysis of secondary sources and a close following of current news and political rhetoric on the conflict.

Keywords: Syria, ISIS, cosmic war, religious extremism, UNHCR, 3RP

1. Introduction

When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in 2010 to protest the injustice of the municipal government in the town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, he did not realize that this fire would serve as the spark for the uprisings that rapidly spread throughout the neighboring Arab countries of Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria.ⁱThis series of revolts in the Middle East came to be known as the Arab Spring, as the Arab people rebelled against the authoritarian rule in their states.

In Syria, citizens began with peaceful protests against what they saw as the oppressive regime of Bashar Al-Assad. However, in 2011, a pro-democracy protest in the city of Der'aa led to bloodshed as army officers were commanded to fire upon the crowd of adolescent demonstrators. By 2013, the country was distinctly divided into loyalist forces to the Ba'ath Party and opposition forces.

The presence of extremist organizations worsens the situation as they engage in violent bombings and shootings as a form of what they believe to be religious duty to God. The founding of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, more widely known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), saw the advent of a group that appears to have no limits. Since its establishment in 2013 as an organization separate from Al-Qaeda, ISIS has claimed responsibility either directly or indirectly for 126 attacks in 23 countries, not including the attacks in Syria and Iraq themselves.ⁱⁱAccording to the United Nations special envoy for Syria, there has been an estimated 470,000 deaths in the past three years of civil war.ⁱⁱⁱ

The fact that religion is being used to justify violence as a means of maintaining or restoring order blurs the line between religion and politics. Leaders of opposition groups, such as the infamous Osama Bin-Laden, believed that religion should be the influencing force in governmental politics and leaders across the Middle East have strived to expel foreign involvement to establish a religiously backed government, as shown by the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

This foreign involvement is often from the Western sphere, particularly the United States, for economic reasons. The US has strived to maintain a stable foundation in the Middle East in an effort to fuel its oil-rich industrial processes. However, its platform was rocked with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Many nations in the Arab League felt that the US invasion was an attempt to seize and convert an Arab country to a secular, Western stronghold. Further, the discovery that the reports of Iraq harboring chemical and nuclear weapons were false led to the widespread resentment of US actions in the Middle East. Al-Qaeda was only founded in 2004, after Saddam Hussein was executed and the exact year the US decided to invade. Interviews with leaders of extremist organizations such as Ibrahim Al-Baghdadi, a past Caliphate of ISIS, indicate that many of them only engaged with extremist rebel groups after US sent its own military units to the area.^{iv} US-Arab relations are very tense and debates are constantly circulating about how justified Western involvement is in the Arab sphere.

Moreover, terrorist group activities have led to the exodus of millions of Syrian natives from their homeland. According to UN statistics, approximately 4.5 million Syrians have fled and are seeking refuge in the neighboring Middle Eastern countries of Egypt, Turkey and Jordan or Europe.^vAdditionally, more than 7.6 million people have been displaced from their homes within Syria due to the devastating amount of bombing activity that is continuously occurring in some highly prone hazard zones. In the past year, Syria has appealed to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), to provide aid in order to care for the Syrian people as well as the huge number of Palestinians fleeing from the West Bank.

The worsening condition in Syria calls for immediate action by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in order to prevent a dire humanitarian crisis. This paper explores this crisis from economic and social aspects and explores possible policy measures that can be implemented to alleviate the calamity.

2. Literature Review

A dominant theme in the body of literature concerning religious fundamentalism and terrorist organizations is the idea of cosmic war and its ever-lasting presence in acts of extremism. A cosmic war is a religious war in which “God is directly engaged on one side over the other.”^{vi} The physical warfare and violent bloodshed that often accompany a cosmic war are just proxies for the real war, which is believed to be waged in the heavens. A cosmic war is a war fought against ideals. It is a war fought for one’s faith.

An example of such a holy war is the First Crusade that occurred in 1095, when the Pope urged Western European Christians to recapture the holy site of Jerusalem from Muslim forces. The Muslims then waged their own holy struggle or “jihad” on the Christian invaders and so a holy war ensued. The war was fought between two distinct sides. The Crusades serve as the first of many examples of Reza Aslan’s view that in a cosmic war, the world is divided into good and evil and there is no middle ground.^{vii} One can either fight for God or against God.

In fulfilling this divine responsibility, the cosmic warrior turns to God for justification for his actions. He is taught that his duty is to fight with “the full force of God’s wrath”^{viii} and hence, religious violence emerges.

Such “cosmic war” rhetoric has carried over the centuries and can be seen in today’s warfare. Mark Juergensmeyer’s interviews with members of the Palestinian Hamas organization reveal that suicide bombers see themselves as martyrs who are willingly sacrificing themselves for God’s purpose. One Hamas suicide bomber revealed in a video that if everybody is going to die at some point, “one is fortunate to be able to choose one’s destiny.” Another quoted, “There is a difference between one death and another and the only true death is one on the path of God.”^{ix} Their ardent religious sentiment serves to show their conviction that God is the ultimate being and that an individual should do whatever he can to be worthy of His following.

This frame of mind feeds directly into the rhetoric of modern-day terrorist organizations. When Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi created the Islamic State of Iraq and el-Sham (ISIS), he believed in the principle of Global Jihadism. Reza Aslan explains this to be “a series of transformative movements that seek to invoke a cataclysmic global change”. For ISIS, this change is the establishment of a powerful Islamic caliphate.

In his book *Terror in the Mind of God*, Juergensmeyer elaborates on the methods these groups use to achieve their goals. He begins by referring to a few incidents in which the instigators used religion as a justification such as the bombing of a Muslim mosque by Dr. Baruch Goldstein in 1994, the release of the toxic sarin gas aboard a Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo clan and the assassination of India’s prime minister, Indira Gandhi.

The common aspect that threads all these incidents together is that they were all very public displays of violence and decimation. The idea that stems from this is that the crux of every terrorism act ever committed is to provoke fear in its witnesses. The instigators of such acts target specific institutions that contradict what they see as the doctrines of their religious faith. They frequently target secular landmarks with a significant population turnout, such as the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, in order to proliferate their message to the masses.^x

However, ISIS has proved to use the idea of terror in a more sadistic manner. Televised beheadings and executions serve to incite fear in their audience and this fear is meant to push non-believers into submission to the caliphate.^{xi} The difference between the previous listed incidents and the atrocities committed by ISIS is the rhetoric behind their actions.

The former incidents could be seen as driven by hate and were committed by individuals or small groups. ISIS, however, is a Middle Eastern-rooted organization that has a global following. Their struggle can be viewed as the epitome of what a cosmic war is fought for.

3. Methodology

This research paper employed the use of literary sources, written by authors who have had experience in the Syrian region or who have an expertise in studying religious war. News articles were referred to in order to grasp the extent of the situation and to remain updated with current news of ISIS attacks around the world and foreign involvement in the region. Additionally, this paper utilized information obtained directly and indirectly from scholarly articles written on the topic of the consequences of US intervention in the Middle East and from articles that quote international law to propose solutions to the current Syrian refugee problem.

4. The Conflict and Its Actors

The Syrian war has ceased to be a civil war in the sense that it is no longer a war being fought between two or more distinct sides. The US Defense Intelligence Agency estimates the total number of rebel groups fighting against the Assad regime to be 1,200 and because of this, the war is likely to last for a couple more years.^{xii} These rebel groups are known to have fluid alliances and therefore, an exact scheme of who is fighting who is difficult to obtain. However, we are able to identify those major groups that have a significant control over parts of Syria and whose alliances are set in stone.

The first group is the Islamic State of Iraq and el-Sham (ISIS). The Islamic State was established as a movement designed to propagate the message of Salafi Jihadism: Muslims all across the world need to return to their true roots and embrace traditional Sunni Islam. However, the traditional version of Sunni Islam as interpreted and preached by the Islamic State proved to be of a very aggressive nature. The group first emerged in Syria during the first two years of the civil war. ISIS combatants from Iraq crossed the border from the southeast and swept through Syrian cities, shocking citizens and rebel leaders alike with their violent demonstrations

and brutal executions. Hard-liner Saudi Arabians and Al-Qaeda members who had previously lent financial funding to the organization began to withdraw and condemn the group's massacres of other fellow Muslim groups.

The group sought to establish a stronghold in Syria that would strategically benefit as a land bridge between Iraq and Syria, in order to bolster the Caliphate Empire. In 2014, ISIS managed to capture the second-largest Iraqi city of Mosul, substantiating the group as the most powerful and richest extremist organization in the world. Since 2012, ISIS has lost control of the Iraqi city of Falluja but the group has not yet lost its stronghold in Mosul. In Syria, the group controls vast swaths of land that stretch across the country and include the cities of Manbij, Ar-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor. Among the many actors present in Syrian territory, the Islamic State of Iraq and el-Sham is the only group that has captured territory that stretches across the entire country (see Appendix 1).

ISIS is a non-state actor that seeks to impose its religious doctrine harshly through brutal physical violence. The "transformation" they strive for is in the form of conversion to their version of Sunni Islam or execution for those who refuse to follow this version.

This is where the religiously fueled extremism turns to terrorism and the international community starts to pay attention. The Global Coalition formed in 2014, led by the United States of America, was designed to "degrade, and ultimately destroy, the ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy," as stated by President Barack Obama at its inauguration.^{xiii} The Coalition has succeeded in holding back ISIS forces but has yet to secure a real victory. Bombing campaigns often end up harming more of the civilian population, adding to the already alarming death toll. Moreover, the Coalition is seen by some to be US-move to hinder Russian influence in the region and many view this intervention in as a US plot to remove an unwanted dictatorship in the Middle East, as the US did in 2003, with the removal of Saddam Hussein.

The United States and other foreign powers also seek to protect economic interests, as the area is the primary source of oil and serves as a vital ingredient in many industrial processes. The U.S. currently imports around 11% of its crude oil from Saudi Arabia, while imports of the product from Iraq has fallen from approximately 150,000 barrels in 2010 to 83,000 barrels in 2015^{xiv} – presumably as a result of the increasing tensions and military campaigning taking place in the region.

Similarly, Russian involvement in the region is primarily to protect military interests. Syria has been Russia's only ally in the Middle East since the end of the Afghanistan War in 1989. Russia has an important military base in the Syrian city of Latakia and the port at Tartus is the only Middle Eastern hub for the Russian Black Sea fleet. Russia is also coordinating its own offensive strategy against ISIS, although Russia and the Coalition have yet to sign an agreement joining forces against the terrorist organization, which is argued by many to be a better solution to the problem. Additionally, the Russian government firmly backs the Assad presidency and constantly vetoes any UN proposal to make moves towards his resignation.

Bashar Al Assad came to power quite spontaneously in 2000, following the death of his father, the late President of Syria, Hafiz Al-Assad. Assad promised his people he would enact political reforms that would make the government more democratic and begin a transition from the oppressive regime his father had led. However, Assad failed to enact any impactful changes and in 2011, when protests erupted in Der'aa against the possible corruption in the judicial system, Assad's government clamped down harshly and immediately. His government has been accused of executing the 2014 chemical attacks against a Syrian rebel camp in Ghouta. The horrific incident left around 1,800 dead and led to the hospitalization of 3,000 more.

These international players are only the major foreign powers involved in the conflict. The fluid alliances between the pre-existing 1,200 recorded rebel groups in the nation increase the complexity of the war. However, as millions of displaced Syrians flee into the neighboring nations, it is clear that what used to be a domestic problem has transformed into an international issue that is forcing foreign governments to deal with its repercussions.

5. Life In Syria

5.1. Economic Problems

The Syrian economy has contracted by about 60% since the beginning of the war in 2011, plunging the country into a severe economic recession, due to falling oil revenue. This decrease is due to a fall in oil production caused by the destruction of vast areas of capital infrastructure. According to a Chatham House report written by David Butter, "oil production under state control has dwindled from 387,000 barrels per day to under 10,000 barrels per day." This is more than a hundred-fold decrease in the manufacture of one of the country's main exports and has led to a \$10 billion collapse in the value of exports from \$12 billion in 2010 to \$2.1 billion in 2013.^{xv}

Before the war, Syria's workforce was already facing shockingly low wages. The average Syrian worker earned less than \$100 per month and according to the UN Development Program surveys, 30% of the Syrian population lived in poverty. Currently, the unemployment rate is the staggeringly high value of 54.3% of the population, as homes and workplaces are constantly being destroyed.^{xvi}

The war's negative impact has been particularly prominent because of the colossal number of people that have been driven out of the country or displaced from their homes. The country's real GDP has fallen by 30%, largely as a result of the population drop of about 23%.

5.2. Humanitarian Devastation

UNHCR estimates there are 4.5 million Syrians who have fled the country to seek refuge in neighboring countries or Europe. The drop is also a result of the more than 470,000 deaths that have occurred since 2011 and the approximately 6.5 million people who have been internally displaced, making it impossible for them to continue their routine life.

Further, bombing campaigns by the United States and Russia have devastated cities such as Homs and left hundreds of people dead on the streets. US airstrikes in the Syrian city of Manbij in July 2016 killed as many as 117 civilians, of whom 73 were identifiable, and was the deadliest reported attack on non-combatants in the anti-ISIS campaign.^{xvii}

Although these campaigns were initiated in an effort to destroy ISIS bases, civilians are often caught in the crossfire and casualties are frequent. The Syrian people are at risk of attacks from any of the competing factions and even their own government, as proved by the chemical attacks on Ghouta. If Syria was already a country on fire, these strikes can arguably be said to have been the gasoline that was poured to create an inferno.

It was the worst chemical strike since 1988 when Saddam Hussein released chemical weapons over the city of Halabja.^{xviii} The death toll was estimated at 1,750. The reagent used is known to have immediate fatal effects with direct contact. The attacks on Ghouta mirrored the chemical assault in Khan al-Assal in March^{xix}, just four months earlier. According to a UN report, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons found traces of the nerve agent sarin in both attacks, leading observers in the international community to believe that the attacks had been orchestrated by the same entity both times. However, the government and opposition groups continue to blame each other, at the expense of the Syrian people.

6. Policy Suggestions

The Syrian people have become collateral damage in the war being fought by all the competing factions in the country. However, the humanitarian crisis is not only limited to its natives. Syria is privy to a high influx of Palestinian refugees, estimated at 450,000 according to UNRWA surveys in 2015.^{xx} As Syrians seek refuge in the neighboring countries of Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, and Palestinians flee to Syria, the situation results in the shifting of the burden to other countries and so, the internal crisis in Syria is a ripple that has culminated in the overall instability and degradation of the entire Middle Eastern region.

This paper explores the possible resolutions that the United Nations humanitarian commissions can develop in order to gradually put an end to the ongoing crisis. The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) is the leading United Nations commission established to deal with a refugee crisis. However, this paper also looks at the work of the Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan, a committee specifically formed to deal with the Syrian refugee crisis. Its in-depth knowledge of the nuances of the situation make it a better establishment for handling the situation, as the organization has many sub-units that are in direct contact with refugees and refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria itself.

1. *Answering financial appeals by the UNHCR and the 3RP*: The projected value of food, water, and medical assistance for 2016 is \$4,539,342,336, the largest financial appeal in history.^{xxi} Of this amount, only \$1.38 billion (roughly 30%) has been received. This money is used to fund the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are running the refugee resettlement programs in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.^{xxii}

2. *Opening routes to safety*: Although the death toll at home is in the millions, the plight of the Syrian refugees does not end there. Seeking escape, many of them turn towards the Mediterranean Sea as a passageway to guide them to the safe shores of Europe. However, with no proper boats or enough food to last them the whole journey, the death toll at sea is constantly increasing. Over the course of three days in May of this year, 2016, there were a recorded 700 deaths in the Mediterranean region,^{xxiii} bringing the total death count in this year alone to around 2,000 lives. European Coast Guard and Navy forces have made efforts to save the lives of these people. However, their answer to the distress calls comes too late.

3. *Revising European immigration laws*: Many refugees seek asylum in Europe. However, many European countries are unwilling to allow the entry of the millions of Syrian refugees, despite spikes in the number of refugee deaths in transit. For example, Jordan is currently sheltering about 650,000 Syrian natives despite its own economic struggles and the United Kingdom, with 78.3 times the GDP of Jordan, has recently released a statement that it will allow a maximum of 20,000 Middle Eastern refugees across its borders in the next 5 years.^{xxiv} This is because many European governments believe that a high population influx will lead to a gradual economic downturn. However, studies have been conducted that show how politically and socially capable these countries are at handling the current amount of refugees and that a population growth can actually lead to economic benefit for these countries. With the recently affirmed Brexit decision and the subsequent fall in the value of the pound, the United Kingdom would presumably be more reluctant to incur the effects of a population inflow at this moment.

7. Conclusions

The Islamic State has surpassed the Taliban and Al-Qaeda as the largest terrorist group in the world. Originally an insurgent group with close ties to Al-Qaeda, the organization has since severed those connections and transformed into a state of its own within Iraq. While foreign nations, led by the United States, attempt to organize an effective battle campaign against the organization and what they view as the tyrannical presidency of Bashar al-Assad, they engage with the Syrian natives and often end up causing more harm than good. The world needs to realize that this civil war is too complex to be solved solely by engaging in physical warfare with the other sides. We need to start with one aspect at a time and the focus for right now should be the people.

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APPENDIX

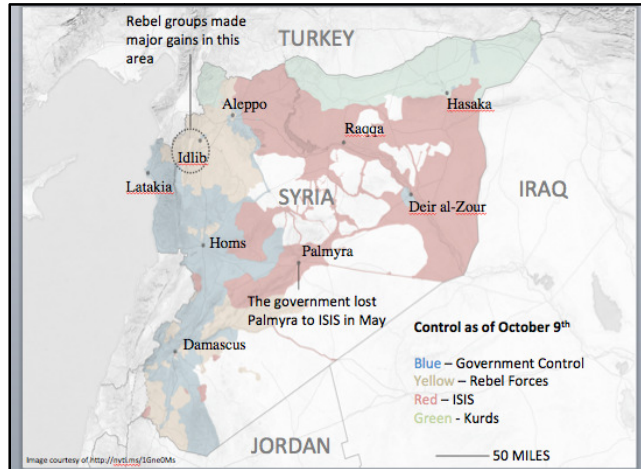


Figure 1: Map of Controlled Territory in Syria, as of October 2015