

# Impact of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS) on regional equations in Middle East

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## Abstract

The Middle East has not only accumulated a number of longstanding unresolved issues but has also served as a hotbed for international terrorism. Recently, the so-called “Islamic State” issue has become the most pressing.

The objective of the dissertation is the portrayal of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (commonly known with the acronym of ISIS), and its goal of instituting a new political state (the Caliphate) in the region, de facto destroying previously established borders. The principal objective is the study of the essence of IS, predisposing factors and the future prospects of its existence.

In addition, it should be emphasized that the discussion of the Islamic State is unfeasible without the consideration of other confrontations, regional, Western and Russian interests; as well as the clear-cut “paradoxical alliances” prevalent in the Middle East today.

The dissertation firstly focuses on the advancement of the terrorist group and its breaking on the international political scene as a new global threat.

The major objective of the dissertation is to present a new analysis concerning impact of IS on regional equations in the Middle East.

Based on a descriptive analytical method, this analysis tries to discuss the new dimensions of regional system in the Middle East.

**Keywords:** Middle East, Daesh, regional equations, Iraq, Syria

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Statement of Problem

The Middle East has not only collected a number of long-lasting unresolved issues but has also served as a hotbed for international terrorism. Recently, the so-called “Islamic State” issue has become the most pressing.

ISIL or IS is a Sunni extremist group. It follows an extreme interpretation of Islam, encourages religious violence, and regards those who do not agree with its understandings as infidels or apostates. (Sanikidze, 2015:3)

From June 2014, Daesh or IS has been considered as the main security menace in the Middle East and one of the most significant concerns for European and international peace and security. Daesh, which for many years was just one of many terrorist organizations with associations to al-Qaeda, has succeeded in realizing much more than other similar organizations: it has taken over control of large areas of lands in Syria and Iraq by military operations, generated its own para-state structures in that area, and become the greatest civilizational challenge for the region in a century as it launched a self-proclaimed caliphate and credibly promised to expand further on a global scale. (Strachota, 2015)

The study of the Islamic State is unfeasible without the consideration of other conflicts, regional, Western and Russian interests; as well as the clear-cut “paradoxical alliances” prevalent in the Middle East nowadays.

It has become usual to speak of the map of the Middle East as being re-designed, and regional politics undergoing an ongoing radical transformation since the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ (Yesil Tas, 2015) and the emergence of IS, current geopolitical explanations endorse a new language to define the confusing state of affairs, tethering it to such perceptions as ‘the new Middle East.’

The major objective of the dissertation is to present a new analysis concerning impact of IS on regional equations in the Middle East. The disorder in the Middle East challenged the Westphalian political order as the states started to dissolve along religious or ethnic lines, to the degree that a ‘balkanization of identity’ has been (mostly between Sunni and Shia) arisen. The existing state borders were disputed, mainly as a consequence of the civil wars, leading to so-called ‘failed states.’ These problems led to a new border politics challenging the existing geopolitical space.

Based on a descriptive analytical method, I try to discuss the new dimensions of regional system in the Middle East.

### *1.2 Theoretical Framework: Regional Security Complex*

Kacowicz like Barry Buzan (1991) defines a regional security complex as a specific type of region united by common security problems. In other words, it is a set of states constantly affected by one or more security externalities that originate from a assumed geographic area.

Different categories of regional security complexes might include: power restraining power (through regional hegemony); great power concert; collective security; pluralistic security communities; and integration, in an arising order of institutionalization and shared kinds (Kacowicz, 1998)

Like most other regional theory, security complexes consider the level of analysis located between individual units and the international system as a whole. The important judgment of the theory is rooted in the point that all the states in the system are involved in a worldwide web of security interdependence. But because most political and military dangers travel more easily over short distances than over long ones, insecurity is often related to proximity. (Kacowicz, 1998)

As Buzan views them, regional security complexes are localized sets of anarchy mirroring the international system at large. Their boundaries are indicated by a structural and indigenous pattern of security interdependence beyond which indifference sets in. Also, regional security complexes are a modern phenomenon; they underscore the fragmentation and release of the "overlay" of external influences on regional settings. This security interdependence may involve conditions both of friendship and hostility among the actors, but the latter usually is the more essential determinant. "Unlike most other efforts to define regional subsystems, security complexes remain, for the most part, on the interdependence of competition rather than on the interdependence of shared benefits". (Acharya, 2004)

### *1.3 Review on Previous Literature*

There are many different, incompatible opinions though, concerning the nature of the transformation in the Middle East. Most of these opinions are directed by two kinds of explanation: Spatial and temporal models, respectively, that try to lay bare the origins of the supposed renovation in Middle East politics. While the first kind address outside forces or external actors with their expected influence in the region, the second kind highlights a parallel between the past and the present, or an analogy between history and contemporary Middle East questions. (Yesil Tas, 2015)

The first model is best represented by Christopher Hill’s, *The End of the Arab State*, which focuses on political transformation –the border changes and ideological detachments– and mainly blaming American interventions in the region.

On such sources, Hill believes the collapse of the Arab nation-state and consequently the disintegration of political identity in the Middle East. The resulting vacuum has been predominately filled by sectarian divisions, which have left the region into total anarchy. Hill proclaims that sectarianism had been existing in the region all of time; however, the leaders, as in the case of Ba’athism in Iraq, had resorted to policies mainly concentrating on civic identity so as to bar sectarianism and to reserve Iraq. (Hill, 2014)

According to Hill, the U.S. invasion on Iraq, beside the Arab Uprisings, became the main catalysts for breaking the region’s political unity and provoking the old sectarian detachments.

Considering the second model, which tries to make sense of the confusing political context of the Middle East by way of finding historic backgrounds, the noticeable argument is Hass’ *The New Thirty Years’ War*. Explaining the Middle East’s current political complication, Hass draws a parallel with one of the most disturbing eras in Europe’s history, namely the Thirty Years War, to envisage the future of the Westphalia order.

The religious-sectarian fights–be it civil or proxy– are the main elements that reveal such a transformation. Hass

claims that, “the region’s pathway is worrisome: weak states unable to police their territory; the few relatively strong states competing for primacy; militias and terrorist groups gaining greater influence; and the erasure of borders”.

The first regional axis –Iran and Saudi Arabia– is mostly based on sectarian, economic and strategic dissimilarities in perception. Thus Iran backs Assad’s regime, Hezbollah, Shia militia groups in Iraq, and Houthis in Yemen; while Saudi Arabia, feeling endangered by Iran, protects the opposition groups in Syria, the Sunnis in Iraq and the opposition militaries in Yemen. The second axis is perceived mainly at the global level, where America’s backing for Saudi Arabia and Israel may be balanced by Russia’s backing for Iran and the Assad regime. (Yesil Tas, 2015)

Francesca Beniamino by his dissertation tries to focus on the challenges IS is imposing on Middle East. For him, first to be stated is the Sykes-Picot agreement which in 1916 identified different areas of the region under Western powers' influence, in the event of the death of the Ottoman Empire. (Beniamino, 2015)

Jessica Lewis Mcfate through his detailed report elaborates the various dimensions of U.S.-led anti-IS campaign. As he states IS by its strategy “Remain and Expand” can be considered as an adaptive enemy. Macfate believes that Regional sectarianism fortifies IS’s existence. The social mobilization of the Arab world against Assad and Iran has already given IS and al-Qaeda better liberty of activities. (Macfate, 2015)

These studies shed light on some of the new dimensions of regional questions, limiting studies to finding different parallels between the present and the past, but rather than providing a more complete image, these studies tend to generate more ambiguities than answers regarding new structure and new regional equations in the Middle East. In the most of them, the roots of IS’s emergence and the future of new regional puzzle are not enough discussed.

## 2. Data and Analysis

The rise of IS has created a definitive challenge to the regional political order. It defies:

- current political regimes in the Middle East;
- recognition of the existing frontiers;
- notion of nations as sovereign states;
- west intervention to construct the historical backgrounds of the region’s present shape, and recently has been a path for West to protect and secure the benefits;
- place of the west as a civilizational refers for the elites and people of the region. (Strachota, 2015)

### 2.1 Complex Situation and Guesstimates Based on Conspiracy Theory

The spread of conspiracy theory about the origins of Daesh’s last success are a good demonstration of this state of affairs, i.e. the ongoing proxy war, the opaqueness, the dynamics and the absence of confidence in the Middle East. According to those theories, IS could be:

- a) A project designed and reinforced by Riyadh, planned against Iranian regime and its followers, i.e. the Syrian regime and the Shia of Iraq;
- b) A scheme realized by Tel Aviv and the USA for destabilizing the region and organize the successive conflict, in the absence of other mechanisms to control the region;
- c) A Turkish plan, planned as tool of battering ram to eradicate the Syrian and Iraqi states and Iran’s influence, counterbalance the Kurdish groups and clear the ground for Turkish enlargement;(Strachota, 2015)
- d) An Iranian scheme premeditated to weaken Sunni cohesion and terrify the Kurdish groups and Iraqi Shias so that they turn to Iran; proponents of this theory highlight how easily the Shia Iraqi army yielded its lands and armaments to Daesh in June 2014;
- e) A Russian project – this theory address the anti-American feature of Islamic State’s actions, and the presence of a huge group of combatants from the Russian Federation and the Commonwealth of Independent States, which is supposed to have been infiltrated by the Russian security forces.

### 2.2 Internal Regional Actors

#### 2.2.1 Saudi Arabia

One of the major causes of origin IS are conflict of interests between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Pro-Iranian regime in Baghdad and the official Tehran believe that by financing the extremist Sunni organizations in Iraq and Syria, Saudi Arabia directly influenced the existence of IS, and later its expansion. The explanation for this stance, we see in

Saudi Arabia fear of the increasing influence of Iran. Merits of this fear are that Iran can exert influence on the Shiite population that inhabited the east of Saudi Arabia. (The most important resources of oil are located in the east part of Saudi Arabia) Iran's influence as a regional power are becoming progressively important. In this context, the IS and its action are in the interest of Saudi Arabia, and the goal is to reduce the influence of Iran in the region. (Berisa, 2016: 54)

### 2.2.2 Iran

Definitely, the conflict between Iran and nearly all the states of the region has been and remains a key issue. Iran has been constantly trying to challenge the regional order generated on US influence since its revolution, and has tracked an wide policy aimed at developing its domination in the region, but it has been continuously surrounded and exposed by the USA (as well as Israel and Saudi Arabia) with war, economic sanctions, or the prospect of a coup.

In this context, the issues of Syria and Iraq seem to fit into the plan of a clash between Iran's supporters and the clients of Iran's opponents. However, while the Iran camp can be debatably described as unified to some extent, no consolidated anti-Iran front exists today (which seems to be the consequence of the USA's withdrawal).

In the conditions of the Middle East's present crisis, Iran has been trying to build up an image of itself as a strong state capable of providing a protective parasol to political players such as Baghdad, Damascus or the Kurds, the Shias from the Arab Peninsula and groups threatened by the Sunni radicals.

Iran's mission is to create an alliance between Shia-majority countries to challenge regional powers. As a result, Iran was the first country to aid Iraq against the IS assault. Tehran will continue to quell the extremist threat in Iraq and support the Syrian government against Sunni rebel groups. Iran will likely appear stronger after this conflict helping get rid of extremist Sunni rebel groups in Iraq and Syria, it will be in a position to further challenge Saudi Arabia for regional supremacy/move closer to forming a Shia alliance.

### 2.2.3 Qatar

Like other (Persian) Gulf kingdoms, Qatar has been accused of being soft on Qataris who apparently help fund radical groups. (Page. 2015:31) The Qatari foreign minister rejects that any Qatari money has been transferred to IS. (Financial Times, 2014)

Qatar may be closer to Jabhat al-Nusra. One US observer wrote: 'a senior Qatari official told me he can identify al-Nusra commanders by the blocks they control in various Syrian cities'. (The Atlantic, 2014)

### 2.2.4 UAE

The UAE has taken part in attacks against IS. For UAE, any step should begin with a defined strategy for open involvement against IS, but must address the other dangerous terrorist fractions in the region. (Page 2015:33)

It also critics for tackling the support networks, the entire militant ideological and financial complex that is the vital signs of radicalism. (Al Otaiba, 2013)

### 2.2.5 Bahrain

Bahrain is the Persian Gulf State with majority Shia inhabitants. The government is dependent on Saudi Arabia, particularly since the latter sent military forces to Bahrain in 2011 to help shore up the government against the rising Shia rallies.

### 2.2.6 Turkey

Turkey's affiliation with IS was ambivalent, too. While Turkey's ruling party the AKP is not frequently blamed of sharing the extremist Islamic ideology which has been connected to IS and Saudi Arabia, it is an Islamist party that is moving Turkey away from its traditional secularism. Like other régimes in the region, it tries to step a line between trying to contain the threat of IS across the border in Syria and provoking harsh reaction from extremist forces at home. The Turkish government also looks for regime change in Damascus, because it considers the Assad regime a greater threat than IS. (Page 2015 :35)

Turkey has been charged for some time of permitting radical fighters to cross into Syria, and of consenting oil from IS-controlled wells to be exported for Turkey. (Al-Monitor, 2014)

Turkey has an interest in this battle because of the endless conflict between Kurdish separatists and the Turkish state. The situation of Turkish Kurds is unsolidified at present, with some hesitant progress towards a settlement. Meanwhile, Ankara has a beneficial trade liaison with self-governing Iraqi Kurdistan, much of whose oil production goes north to Turkey. (Commons Library Standard Note, 2013)

### 2.2.7 Egypt

In Sunni-majority Egypt, the state of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, protected by the anti-Islamist (Persian) Gulf States of Saudi Arabia and the UAE looks to the Muslim Brotherhood and associated Islamist groups as illegitimate. This has been demonstrated by its treatment of the Brotherhood in Egypt itself, but when the Egyptian military deposed Mohammed Mursi, it also finished the previous government's support for mainstream Syrian rebels and finished hospitality for Syrian refugees into Egypt.

### 2.2.8 Israel

Israeli program was to keep a low outline on the Syrian issue. Israel has a border with Syria and had dark but stable relations with its neighbor for many years. Despite hostile rhetoric, Syria had kept control on anti-Israel sentiment in the country, preventing border clashes and preventing any expanding in the relationship, despite the fact that Israel remains in occupation of an important portion of Syrian territory in the Golan Heights, an occupation almost regarded as illicit.

So although Israeli leaders harbor few warm approaches for the Assad regime and would do little to protect it, many fear that whatever replaced, it could be worse for Israel.

The main fear for Israel is the intervention of the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah and the potential for a spill-over of the struggle into Israel, particularly via Lebanon. But the situation has changed as the area of Syria next to the Golan Heights has been taken over by jihadi groups, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra. (Page. 2015:39)

### 2.2.9 Lebanon

Lebanon has been like a victim of happenings in Syria ever since its formation as a state and it has received from the current war more refugees relative to its population than any other state.

Sectarian conflicts failed to heal after the 1975-90 civil wars and have now been made much worse by the circumstances in Syria. Both the Lebanese army and Hezbollah are protecting Shia religious ceremonies after IS and Jabhat al-Nusra threatened to aim Shia worshippers.

Lebanon's official armed forces are fragile, and not as powerful as the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah. So the Lebanese government does not pretend to have direct impact on developments in Syria with the threat of force. The main aim is to minimize the spill-over of the conflict into Lebanese territory.

### 2.2.10 Kurds



**Map 1.** Estimated Zones of Main Kurdish lodging. (Fondation-Institut kurde de Paris)

There are nearly 14 million Kurds in Turkey, 6 million in Iran, about 5 million in Iraq, and under 2 million in Syria. The role of the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria is essential to the struggle. Kurdish forces are local, Muslim forces with some proven efficiency and a largely pro-Western and anti-fundamentalist approach, at least as they are observed in the West.

There is, however, a danger of over-reliance on Kurdish militaries; the fact that there is no Kurdish state means that Kurdish military power will always be limited. Nor are the Kurds a unified population: Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria have lived under different governments, have different interests and even speak expressively different versions of the Kurdish language. (Page.2015:6)

Iraqi Kurdistan has also been divided between the followers of President Massoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), these two men being leaders of important Kurdish tribes. The civil war between the two sides resulted in a division of the territory into rival fiefs for a time.

### *2.3 External Powers*

#### *2.3.1 USA*

Determined to ensure its pledge to end US involvement in current wars the Obama administration was doubtful to get involved in new ones. But that policy came under increasing strain as serious crises, particularly in Ukraine and in the Levant, led to calls for more decisive US involvement. In the Syria the US was wary of getting drawn in to a very intractable problem and the Obama Administration appeared ready to take considerable criticism for sticking to a non-interventionist policy, particularly when critics said that Obama's 'red line' on the use of chemical weapons did not amount to much. Despite the hesitancy, the US was conducting air strikes against IS in Iraq and against IS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

The IS surge to take Mosul, Iraq's second biggest city, shifted thinking in Washington. It is not clear that IS in Iraq presents more of a strategic threat than the civil war in Syria; the violence in Syria has certainly claimed far more lives and led to a lot more human suffering. But there are several reasons why the US was more ready to react to events in Iraq than Syria. There is significant US political and material investment in Iraq to preserve. While the Iraqi government may not have turned out to be the strategic ally that the US hoped for when it led the invasion in 2003, it still has relatively close ties to Washington.

#### *2.3.2 Russia*

Russia has also been a major player in the Middle East, many times clashing with the West (US and its allies). Russia has mainly supported nations which were enemies of the US supported nations, for example Syria and Iran. This is because of the established sphere of influence of both countries.(EMUN, 2016:13)

Russian officials have often accused Western and particularly US involvement for the insecurity in the Middle East and warned the US not to play into the hands of IS propaganda. Moscow's approach to the international efforts to challenge IS will be significant. Russia has traditionally reinforced the West's campaigns against Islamist extremist groups; it cooperated with the NATO campaign in Afghanistan by assisting the Northern Supply Network, for example, and has defined IS and Jabhat al-Nusra as terrorist groups.

Cooperation does not extend to the situation in Syria, however. Russia protects the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and has opposed intervention to help any of the opposition forces in that conflict; the Russian-brokered deal with Syria to decommission its chemical weapons arsenal was greeted by some as a triumph for President Putin and was seen by critics as letting the Assads off the hook.

On October, 2015 Russia started a bombing campaign against IS. Furthermore, she has declared that the US-led bombings are illegal as the UN has not authorized them and neither the Syrian government has. Russia does have the authorization of President Assad to carry out bombing runs. (EMUN, 2016:14)

### *2.4 Proxy War and Sectarian*

The Proxy War is between the US and Russia to see who will control Syria after the civil war ends. Saudi Arabia is supporting the Sunni rebels (they stopped supporting IS when it became too powerful and uncontrollable), while Iran supports the Shia government. Syria is now a fighting arena where everyone is gambling for their favorite ally, only worsening the circumstances.

The proxy war in Syria and IS is the result of a very complicated mixture of love and hate between Middle Eastern nations and the global powers. First, we have the US and Russian rivalries that go back to the Cold War. (EMUN, 2016:11) We also have Saudi Arabia (backed by the US), a Sunni theocracy who is always fighting for influence

over the area against Iran (backed by Russia), who is also a theocracy. Israel, as another example, makes all Muslim Nations feel uneasy, but as it is backed by the US they had to admit that Israel was going to stay. Russia and most of the Muslim community backs Palestine, who is not even recognized as a state. Allies back their allies' enemies.

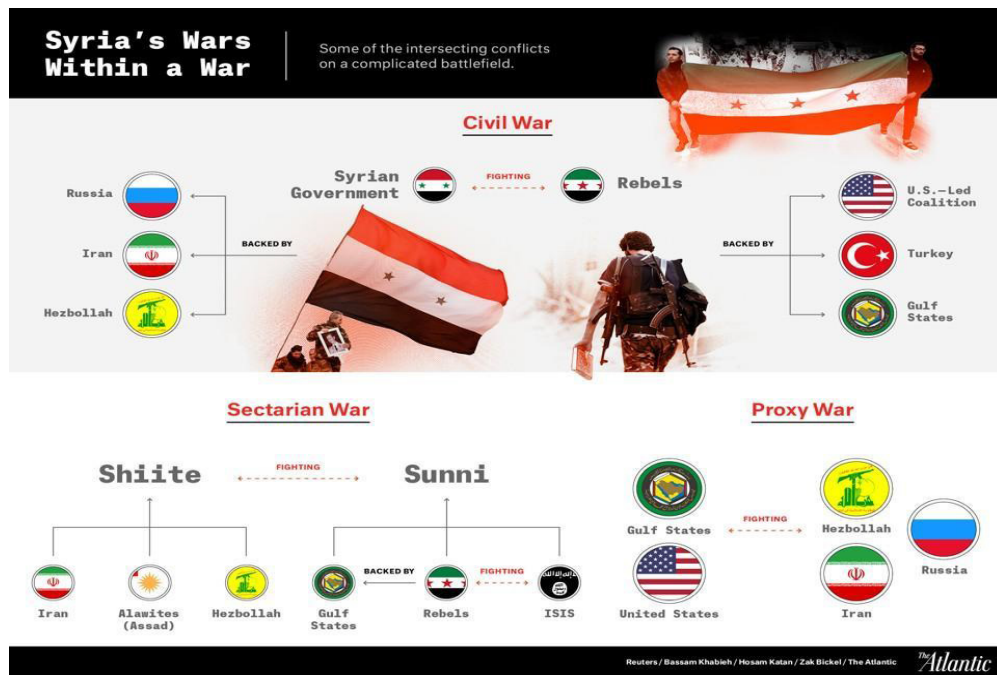


Chart 1. Sectarian and Proxy war in Syria (EMUN.2016:11)

As result of the mess in the Middle East, the political situation looks roughly like this chart.

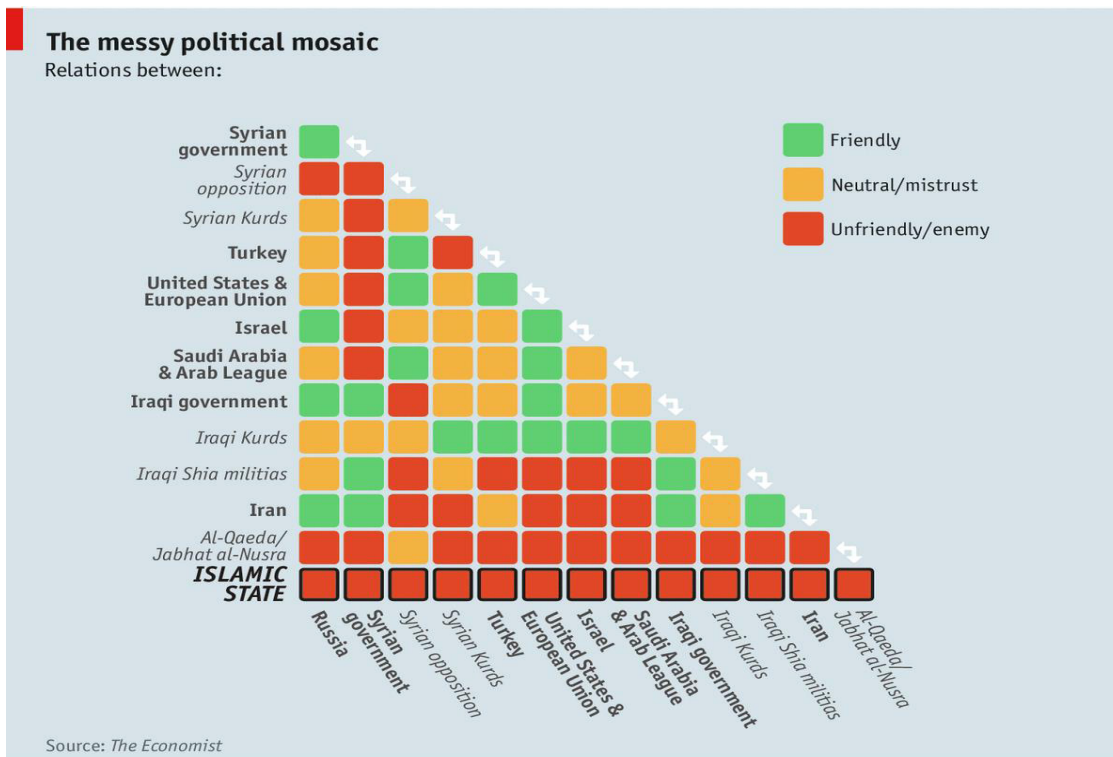


Chart 2. The Messy Political Mosaic –Groups and States. (EMUN.2016:12)



Many nations also back terrorist and insurgent groups. Saudi Arabia, for example, sponsors Sunni terrorist organizations and has been compared to IS (which is a Sunni terrorist group) in several occasions, as they follow a similar version of Sharia law, which the international community has deplored many times. Saudi Arabia fights IS because they are rivaling their power and destabilizing the Middle East, not because the government believes that IS actions are wrong. The US has also sponsored terrorism; most notably she has trained Osama Bin Laden. The US has been fighting many of the organizations that Saudi Arabia supports and has also deplored the actions and beliefs of IS (which are also the beliefs of the Saudi government). The US and Saudi Arabia are ideologically opposed, and they back each other's enemies, yet they are allies. Middle Eastern relations are complicated. The US-Saudi alliance might be about Oil, which shows that alliances in this area are purely of convenience. (EMUN, 2016:12)

### 3. Conclusion

Interventions by other countries have had an important effect on the circumstances in the region as outside powers have seen the power vacuum, particularly in Syria, as opportunities to chase their own objectives. The fighting has shown up the difference between those objectives, particularly between Shia and Sunni countries, but also among the different Persian Gulf countries, and Turkey, which have been following sharply different foreign policies. This has added to the complication of the conflict, making any resolution more difficult to attain.

IS is the kind of adaptive and resilient enemy that is difficult to defeat outright. Insurgencies and terrorist networks often present the same challenge, capitalizing upon time, the ability to impose damage, and the ability to evade defeat as means to erode and collapse more sophisticated armies.

This does not; however, dictate that IS will only conduct conventional warfare in the future. IS retains the option to vary its military configuration, which will make measuring its defeat more difficult. IS's military defense may not be purely conventional, as IS's actions in April 2015 following the loss of Tikrit suggest.

This defense will likely incorporate the full range of its offensive strengths, involving guerilla and terrorist tactics as well as expansion in areas where it can build further depth. IS's strategy is likely to maximize its flexibility to evade defeat and outlast its enemies while also recalling its claim to a "caliphate".

The assumption that the Middle Eastern order is collapsing, and that a vacuum has been created by US policy, has not only open opportunities for forces such as Islamic State, but has also intersected with the ambitions of the new-old regional powers, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Apart from their pragmatic desire to influence the unstable surrounding area, and fill the vacuum left by the United States as its position in the Middle East erodes, another crucially important motivation comes from the reassessments taking place in their countries, which create a positive answer to the region's general problems.

In the conditions of the Middle East's present crisis, Iran has been annoying to build up an image of itself as a strong state capable of creating a defending umbrella to political actors such as Baghdad, Damascus or the Kurds, the Shias from the Arab Peninsula and groups threatened by the Sunni radicals.

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