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# An Analysis of the Sociopolitical Factors Contributing to the Politicization of Sunni Islam in the Middle East

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIOPOLITICAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO

THE POLITICIZATION OF SUNNI ISLAM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

by

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**Abstract**

This research analyzes the sociopolitical trends of the 20$^{th}$ century that have contributed to the susceptibility of the Middle East to extremist organizations, with a particular focus on Sunni Islamic groups such as the Islamic State. The goal of this analysis is to show how the failure of states to provide sociopolitical and economic stability has led to the politicization of religiosity as an alternative to secular authority.

The major aspects analyzed will be the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, imperialism, nationalism, and the eventual turn towards fundamentalist, extremist organizations within the Middle East. The failure of governmental systems to secure sociopolitical and economic stability has resulted in the undermining of state authority, leaving the region susceptible to insurgencies by extremist organizations in the 21$^{st}$ century that purport legitimized authority through their associations with Islam.

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**Introduction**

The success of Sunni Islam insurgencies on nations in the Middle East, such as the Islamic State (IS), may be more clearly understood by evaluating the multidimensional cultural, social, economic, and political factors contributing to the continued difficulties and instability experienced across the region today. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1978, religious rebellions have expanded their prominence in the Middle East, offering an alternative to state authority in the wake of perpetual state deterioration. Deficiencies of the state and a failure to provide for the social, political, and economic needs of the people have resulted in a sociopolitical disgruntlement towards secular authority. The state failures perpetuating today are a symptom of cyclical inadequacies by ruling administrations to address the inherent difficulties at the core of the complexity of the region.

While the inherent cultural, political, social, and religious divides have perpetuated across centuries, the larger focus of this analysis will aim to address the sociopolitical and cultural trends, largely of the 20th century, that have contributed to the politicization of religiosity across the region today. Decisions made by imperial powers early in the 20th century would set the stage for the continued deficiency of states to address the social, political, and economic conflicts that have lingered into the 21st century. Secular nationalist regimes repressed political and religious freedoms and charged underlying resentments. As nationalist regimes increasingly modernized, inequality and social distance between classes would grow and contribute to the division

and resentment. The politicization of religiosity that has conceptualized around the region has offered an alternative to state authority that fills the ideological and political voids prolonged and agitated under flawed state systems.

Disconnect of Western understanding of religious rebellions often assumes the question of the attraction to Sunni Islamic extremist organizations. An analysis of the tumultuous and complex history of the Middle East sheds light on the instability of the region demonstrating how and why religious insurgent groups have gained sympathizers and thus, legitimacy. "Poverty, ignorance, unemployment, and authoritarian regimes are the most prominent problems in the Middle East regarding involvement with radical groups," and these unresolved difficulties have only prevailed over the course of the 20th and into the 21st century.[1] From the backlash against Western derived pressure towards secularization and modernization, to the poisoning of culture and underlying feelings of exploitation and resentment; the continued failure to establish a sense of community and a stabilized state that address the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic voids have contributed to the rise in politicized religious groups that provide an alternative authority with the promise to address perpetual region-wide wrongs.

Modernization of the region caused increasing inequality and social distance among classes and contributed to the social and economic difficulties across the region. The sociopolitical reactions would vary throughout the century—from nationalism in response to European imperialism to secular and militarized nationalism. The repeated failure of these states to address the inherent challenges presented in the region would perpetuate instability. It would not be until the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that an

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[1] (Tasgin and Cam 2016, pg. 78)

alternative challenger to the standing authority would present itself, in the form of

religious insurgencies. Religious rebellions would seep into the 21st century, challenging

the increasingly secular nationalist regimes. The success of the politicization of

religiosity, with a focus on Sunni Islamic organizations, may be attributed to these

organizations' perceived ability to fill the ideological and political void secular

nationalist regimes failed to address. As Kamrava Mehran noted in his introduction to *A

Modern Middle East:*

> although there are vast differences between and within the
> histories, cultures, traditions, and politics of each of these
> regions within the Middle East, equally important and
> compelling shared characteristics unify the region.[2]

This analysis will humbly emulate Mehran's concept of considering the region as

a whole, despite the great deal of differences, in hopes of gaining a more comprehensive

understanding of historic influences leading to continued instability and vulnerability

across the region today. Additionally, while dating back to the introduction of Islam, gaps

in the history are intentional, though not for lack of significance. A large part of the focus

will be on modern 20th century influences and those mentioned before are done so out of

necessity to understand the complexity surrounding the sociopolitical atmosphere.

## Origins of the Caliphate

Understanding sympathies towards the idea of a unified Muslim community, it is

necessary to return to the origins of the notion of the caliphate and analyze the historic

consequences that have contributed to the influence IS and other extremist organization

sympathizers have today. For definitional purposes, the caliphate referred to throughout

this paper uses the Encyclopedia Britannica's definition of "a political-religious state

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[2] (Kamrava 2011, pg. 1)

comprising the Muslim community and the lands and peoples under its dominion in the centuries following the death (632AD) of the Prophet Muhammad."[3] Under the rule of a caliph (successor) holding "temporal and sometimes a degree of spiritual authority," the Caliphate would grow into an empire comprising much of Southwest Asia, North Africa, and Spain.[2]

Turmoil within the Muslim community erupted not long after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in a division that would come to split the Muslim community henceforth—the divide rested on the premise of who was to be the successor of Muhammad and how the role of caliph was to be henceforth passed on. The majority view held was that the community of Muslim followers should select the next caliph, while the minority view believed that the role should be filled by a family member of the Prophet Muhammad. This split in theology is the original premise of Sunni—Shiite division of the Muslim community that would continue to widen and contract over the centuries for ideological reasons. The division would contribute to the violent beginning of the Caliphate, though peaceful times existed between the two groups over their centuries of existence. As a region steeped with a rich history, both ethnic and religious factionalism exists to this day.

**Kharijism**

An analysis of historic influences on the modern sociopolitical status of the Middle East would not be justified without shedding light on an early Islamic sect, of which contemporary fundamental organizations have been deemed a modern day extension—the 7th Century emergence of Kharijism. The Khawarij sect originated during

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[3] (Encyclopedia Britannica 2014)

the first civil war and battle of Siffin in 656 AD, in modern-day Raqqa Syria, after the murder of Caliph Uthman. The major schism within the community falls on the battle for leadership. The lasting influence of the Khawarij lies with the rise of terrorism, but also provides a critical reflection on the importance that the "blend of religion and rule in early Islam created a logical association in Muslim intellectual tradition."[4] Khawarij called for puritanical interpretations of the Qur'an where "judgment belongs to God alone," and unforgiving punishments to noncompliant apostates.[5] The Khawarij, or "those who rebelled," were the first Islamic sect to rebel against authority, with acts of rebellion wreaking havoc on the Umayyah and Abbasid periods supported by other disenfranchised groups. They legitimized their actions by drawing on the divine and dismissing secular authority. Their influence held from 750-1250 CE. There is some debate of whether the Khawarij were a political group or a religious group and thus a question of their motives, but for the purposes of this analysis their influence they shall be considered, "a political group that had a religious response to a perceived injustice," as deemed by Rudolf Ernst Brunnow.[6] The Khawarij early politicization of religiosity and dismissal of the authority of the state speak to the methods by which fundamental religious rebellion organizations operate today.

While the direct authority of the Khawarij on the Islamic world would wane after the Abbasid period, their historic influence would become increasingly important as Islamic fundamentalist groups gained prominence come the late 20th and 21st centuries. The following passage by Jeffrey Kenney summarizes how elements of tradition based in

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[4] (Kenney 2006, pg. 25)
[5] (Sonn and Farrar 2009)
[6] (Brunnow 1884)

deeply rooted historic happenings make the Kharijites' influence on modern terrorist

organizations impressively relevant.

> Moreover, those who participate in a tradition never experience the past as
> an undifferentiated whole. Their sense of the presentness of the past is
> always of a particular past, one with distinctive cast of characters,
> authority, and rebellion. It is through these particulars that a tradition
> creates continuity between past, present, and future, thereby maintaining
> identity through periods of change.[7]

The reemergence of Khawarij influence that would arise largely during the Iranian

Revolution and into the 21st century would act as a facilitator for the "understanding of

the political, social, and economic roots of Islamic extremism."[8] While significant

differences exist between the extremist organization's core beliefs and actions, the

elements of tradition employed and exploited by IS and other parallel extremist

organizations find their foundation in Kharijism, by "fill(ing) a deep historical

perspective that had inherent explanatory power."[9]

**Ottoman Empire**

The Ottoman Empire's success spanning over 600 years demonstrates a manner

of governing the Middle Eastern region by means of a decentralized, provincially based

government with governors overseeing each province under the overarching

administration of the Empire and the ruling sultan, providing a manner of rule fitting to

the tribal, sectarian, territorial factionalism of the region. Those drawn to the idea of a

caliphate today are attracted by the idea of a united Muslim community and reflect on

early rulings like that of the Ottomans as a demonstration of Muslim greatness that once

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[7] (Kenney 2006, pg. 20)
[8] (Kenney 2006, pg. 146)
[9] (Kenney 2006, pg. 149)

was and could once again be.[10] Aptly put by historian Professor Hugh Kennedy, "it's this Muslim unity, the extent of Muslim sovereignty, that people above all look back to."[11] Corrupt and oppressive authoritarian regimes of the 20th and 21st centuries, largely sponsored and promoted by Western countries, have to an extent belittled the complex construct of the region; but by generally foreclosing options for legal political dissent, they have also in effect forced the dissatisfied and disenfranchised to seek change in authority through alternative methods, such as that offered by Islamic fundamentalist organizations.

The extended success of the Ottoman Empire was founded under Osman Gazi in 1299 CE. In its early stages, the Ottoman Empire grew by way of conquest—welcoming all overtaken men to join Ottoman forces. Success can also be noted by the Ottomans' relative tolerance towards other religious sects—undermining European rule by the Byzantine Empire, which benefited the Ottoman cause as they extended their influence and rule.[12] Gradual expansionism allowed for a base administration and advanced society to cultivate, which drew Muslims to this new sophisticated state.[13] Continued expansionist campaigns into Europe and Asia were successful and as the Empire's society began to progress, a feudal system developed, awarding land to valiant and high ranking soldiers. An effective government, education system, feudal cavalry, and manner of tolerance led to widespread success despite persistent conflict.

The stagnation and eventual decline of the Ottoman Empire began with the death of the Sultan Selim II in 1574. For the next century and a half, the Empire would incur

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[10] (BBC News Magazine 2014)
[11] (BBC News Magazine 2014)
[12] (Fischer 1959, pg. 189)
[13] (Fischer 1959, pg. 172)

losses due to internal failures such as incompetent sultans, poor spending and ruling habits, struggles defending the Empire's vast borders from foreign invasion and occupation, failure to modernize military equipment, provincial revolt resulting in civil wars and power struggles between governors and sultans, and subsequent military insubordination and rebellion among ranks.[14] External factors also contributed to the Empire's decline, such as inflation and the globalization of the trade market, immense military losses including that of Egypt to Napoleon, loss of land and resources through European and Western advancements and treaties, and the destruction of the Empire's naval forces during the Battle of Navarino.[15]

Restoration of the Ottoman Empire in the early 19th century under the leadership of Mahmud II proved unable to counter the internal political dissolution and opposition movements. The eventual expiration of the Ottoman Empire would transpire as the Empire began to turn towards modernizing in the early 20th century; rather than successfully modernizing and surviving, however, it would instead fall into a series of strife and war, coming to a final dissolution not long after the close of World War One.

**Western Imperialism**

Western imperialism set its roots early during the 19th century but would become an increasingly important factor as conflicts within the Ottoman Empire erupted. The collapse produced a void of land, resources, and political influence that would create, "a vacuum that contributed to tensions between local inhabitants and external powers or interests," with those external influencers being largely European powers as well as

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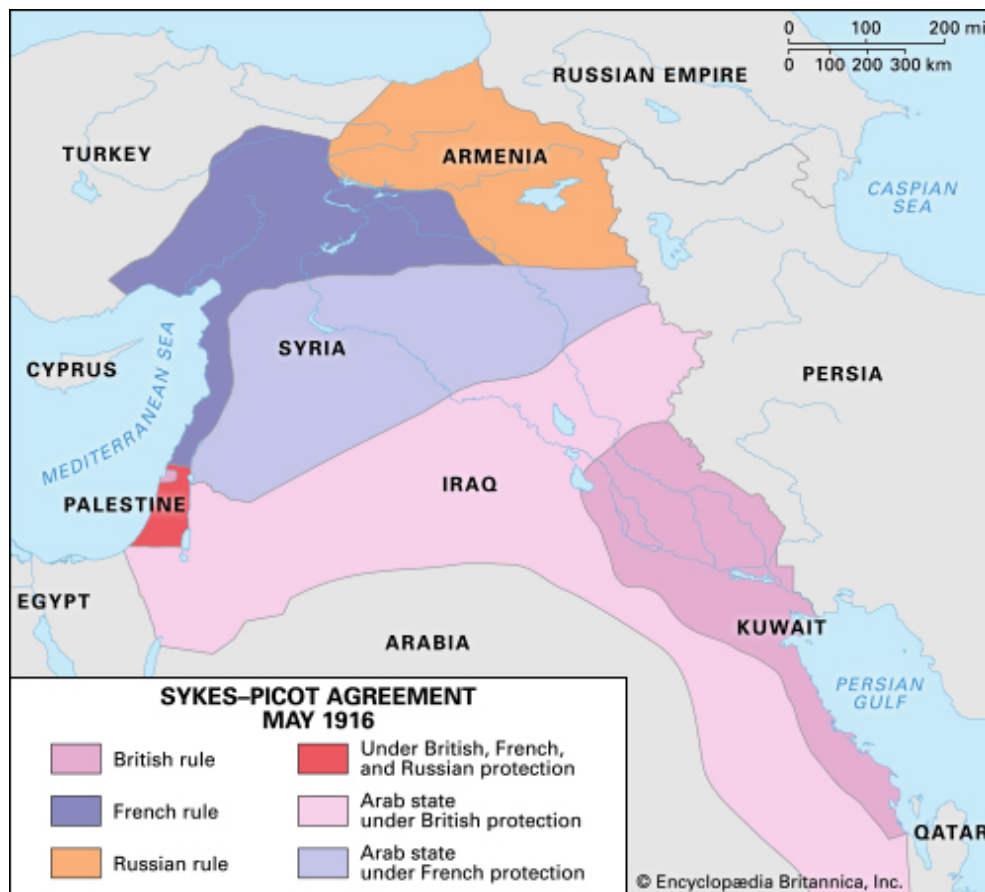[14] (Fischer 1959, pg. 238)
[15] (Fischer 1959)

Russia.[16] It was France and Great Britain with the Sykes-Picot Agreement that would come to divide up the Middle East, with Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine under Great Britain's colonial domination and Syria and Lebanon under French influence; Armenian provinces and some Kurdish territory fell under Russian influence.

There were significant issues with the division of the Middle East, not the least among those being that this agreement was short-sighted, imperialist, and understood as a Western power grab. Lines in the sand were drawn arbitrarily based on British-French disputes with utter disregard to the 2,000-year history of complex tribal, sectarian, and nomadic co-existence.[17] For centuries prior, the Ottomans had governed the tumultuous makeup of varying tribes, sects, peoples and territory through a series of provinces. Turmoil was not a foreign matter during the Ottoman Empire, but it was agreed that a more centralized system of governance would fail in this ethnic and religiously divided region. During a British-French dealing, Georges-Picot noted on this matter, "to promise the Arabs a large state is to throw dust in their eyes. Such a state will never materialize. You cannot transform a myriad of tribes into a viable whole."[18]

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[16] (Woodward 2011)
[17] (Barr 2012, pg. 26)
[18] (The National Archives, Foreign Office 1915)

[19] (Encylopedia Britannica 2016)

The main problems with the Sykes-Picot Agreement that would create resounding difficulties were the secrecy with which the deal was made—neglecting promises of independence made to Arabs, and appointing leaders who were arbitrarily selected based on the imperial powers' choosing. These problems were compounded by the imposition of border lines that "did not correspond to the actual sectarian, tribal, or ethnic distinctions" but were based on compromises by France and Great Britain over their power struggle for territorial control.[20] Lastly, the European imperial enterprise led to the creation of a state system that had been purposefully avoided under the centuries of

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[19] (Encylopedia Britannica 2016)
[20] (Osman, 2013)

Ottoman control, under the idea that such a system would only exacerbate issues that had been present for centuries.[21] As was so aptly used to describe the British support of Feisal as King of Syria and later Iraq - but equally encompasses the harm the Sykes-Picot Agreement and British and French influence would come to bear on the region — it was as if they were "building up, like Frankenstein, a monster which would eventually devour us."[22]

<div align="center">**Nationalism**</div>

Nationalism is an "idea which developed in the nineteenth century, whereby population groups are bound together through their territorial, cultural, and/or ethnic links. It emerged partly as a result of the economic, social, and political uncertainties of the modern, industrializing world."[23] In the Middle East, nationalism would gain support after imperialist agendas failed to provide economic, social, and political stability resulting from the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the arbitrariness of the following state divisions. Merging identities under one united nationalist front legitimized the authority of the movements against the imperialist regimes.

In some aspects nationalism displays quasi-religious characteristics, offering identity and a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself. By prioritizing a united identity over any single faction of beliefs, nationalism in the Middle East was able to transcend many of the inherent difficulties between clashing sects, elevating a sense of community beyond factional bounds.[24] As with differentiations expressed between religious sects, nationalism too, instilled elements of the denigration of "the other" in

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[21] (Osman, 2013)
[22] (MEC, 1921)
[23] (Riches and Palmowski, 2016)
[24] (Mneimneh 2015)

order to bolster the legitimacy and backing of their own identity.[25] Look to the pan-Arab nationalist identity and you can see this idea of an "us- versus-them" identity exemplified. As Hassan Mneimneh articulates, there emerged "a polarization between majorist and minoritist propositions in many Arab societies." Nationalist movements acquire validity by crafting an identity that fits a large subcategory, focused not on belief but on territorial, cultural, or ethnic links that are able to transcend the most inherent divides.

Imperialist rule would set the political agenda across the region for a significant part of the 20th century, influencing national and international politics as well asserting modernization efforts on the state's and their economies. Imperialism, the assertion of foreign agendas, the trend towards modernity, and installment of leaders who were puppets of the imperialist power would result in the slow spread of nationalism as a reaction to imperialism. As nationalism took root, it would assume different shapes across the region. Modernization under the Muhammad Ali Pasha dynasty in Egypt (1805 to 1953) occurred most prominently under Muhammad Ali and his son Ibrahim (1805 to 1848), creating a unified nationalist identity among Egyptians. This identity was bolstered by an increased sense of disgruntlement towards foreigners who were holding more governmental and infrastructure power and influence than the Egyptians themselves.[26] Success of the Egyptian's nationalist movement would be achieved after a three year revolution between Egypt and Britain ending in 1922 upon Britain's declaration of Egyptian independence.

Similar feelings of dissatisfaction and the resulting rise of nationalism were experienced in Syria resulting from French occupation. The Druze Revolt/Franco-Syrian

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[25] (Mneimneh 2015)
[26] (Fischer 1959, pg. 352)

War erupted with initial success by the nationalists, but was eventually suppressed by French forces. Oppressive imperialist rule that ignored the will of the people was fueling a far-reaching nationalist response that would come to consume sociopolitical agendas across the Middle East throughout the century. As would become increasingly apparent as the century commenced, failed oppressive and non-democratic states were continuously met with the rise of radicalized and disenfranchised people in the form of political rebellion. Transitions of power were not often easily nor peacefully achieved, bolstering the argument that acts of rebellion against the existing state were a successful form of political action. It was not only the acts of rebellion, but also the motive of the people to call state authority into question that would foster an immediate and long term political will that acted in direct contrast with the state, undermining legitimacy.

An analysis of Great Britain's preventative measures to suppress a stirring nationalist movement in Iraq demonstrates the imperialist manner asserted by Great Britain (and notably that which other European forces had on Middle Eastern countries across the region) when it came to handling uprisings. Winston Churchill, Great Britain's Secretary of State of the colonies at the time, was presented with the task of, "establishing a form of government that would satisfy both Arab aspirations and Britain's oil-related strategic interests."[27] Churchill made it quite apparent in his statement to officials, "do please realize that everything that happens in the Middle East is secondary to the reduction of expense."[28] Feisal I, recently expelled King of Syria under French authority, was instated as King of Iraq soon thereafter under Great Britain authority as he

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[27] (Fischer 1959, pg. 109)
[28] (Fischer 1959, pg. 113)

was the, "best and cheapest solution."[29] A similar approach was taken in the case of the

Transjordan, where Churchill demanded a leader who was "not too powerful, and who

was not an inhabitant of Transjordania, but who relied upon His Majesty's Government

for the retention of his office."[30] At this pivotal moment in Middle Eastern restructuring,

time and again imperialist powers took self-perpetuating, arbitrary steps rather than

strategic moves to foster long-term success in the region. Their logic also failed to

include sufficient reckoning of the religious dimension of the regional politics.

Come World War II, nationalist politics organized around a call for social

changes under state control ran very separate but parallel campaigns across the region,

demanding change between the state and society**. For Syria and Lebanon during WWII,

the rise of social and political unrest derived from fear of repeated famines and depleted

resources mirroring troubles during WWI, the competition for power between rulers and

French colonial authority, and collaborated groups demanding social rights from the

government.[10] The culmination of the previously mentioned and weakened French

influence subsequent to wartime conditions are how Syria and Lebanon achieved wartime

independence from France in 1946 and 1944 respectively.[31]

Decisions made post WWI and echoed suffering in WWII were serious influences

of the mid-century construction of Middle Eastern institutes and drivers of social

change.[32] After WWI and WWII, nations under imperialist rule, where the effects of the

wars were felt but were fought by outside powers with little control of own resources,

were frustrated with repeated "subordination of local policies and economies to the

[29] (Fischer 1959, pg. 112)
[30] (MEC 1921)
[31] (Thompson 2000, pg. 60)
[32] (Owen 2000, pg. 325)

dictates of forces largely beyond local Middle Eastern control."[33] While some narratives of social reform found footing, it would largely be the nationalist groups that would prosper. These nationalist movements would ultimately sacrifice civil and political freedoms, and in doing so fail to address contradictions within the social fabric of the region's Western hodgepodge creation of nations.[34]

Nationalism, while on the rise, would not truly take center stage in the Middle East until after the 1948 UN Partition Plan, when it would become a region-wide reactionary measure. However, there were some early hints of its rise in Turkey under Ataturk and in Iran, as well as within the rise of Zionism—an arguably different strand of nationalism that would bear great influence on the region. The nationalism that would rise in prominence as a sociopolitical force across the region was widely secular and operated by promoting "freedom from the parochial identities of the past—and thereby avoiding the obstacles that religious loyalties create for a country's political goals."[35] The region was comprised of a fairly new set of arbitrarily constructed states which crossed ethnic, religious, and political factions, unwittingly creating the conditions ripe for the emergence of regional instability. Elements of modernization, a Western created and employed construct advocated for through influence of Middle Eastern leaders, contributed significantly to the secular nature asserted by nationalist parties.

Religion, more than just a means by which to guide one's individual morals and life, provided order, and therefore could be interpreted as a challenger to the secular means of rule that was nationalism, building upon the necessity of suppression by

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[33] (Owen 2000, pg. 326)
[34] (Osman 2013)
[35] (Juergensmeyer 2008, pg. 12)

nationalist leaders and the need to assert a powerful and enforced means of authority. The suppression of religious organizations would have a boomerang effect later in the century as nationalism failed to provide the desired political and economic stability. Nationalism appeared to be a reflection of the increasing modernization of the era; as Egyptian leader Nasser would convey more openly later on, nationalism was perceived as an advancement from the archaic and backwards thinking of religion, forming social and political cohesion out of Western conceptions, rather than ones founded in purportedly divine sources.

Turkish nationalism arose post WWI under Mustafa Kemal Pasha (Atatürk - the "father of the Turks") as Turkey broke ties with the Ottoman Empire and defeated efforts by the Allies to colonize Turkey. Atatürk's methodology would be emulated across the region with the rising prominence of nationalism. He sought to create a new sort of national identity—after centuries of Ottoman rule and arbitrarily drawn borders, his approach was necessary.[36] He attempted to address social ills, economic reforms, and to develop a secularized, Westernized nation; he did so by suppressing political activists and religion with a militarist and dissent-free ruling political party approach.[33] Turkey's new system did bring reform and modernization and would influence other nations in the region to do the same, but the early Turkish Republic's foundation was frail, with Ataturk bending defined practices at his own will to meet his needs.

Beginning in 1921, under similar pretenses, Iran would seek to modernize with Reza Khan leading the way. Reza sought to modernize Iran, improve its economy, and irradiate cultural influencers of the past. Reza's struggle came with the territory—Iran

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[36] (Kamrava 2011, pg. 54)

was "ethnically and tribally more divided than Turkey, economically and industrially less developed, and had a more powerful, conservative establishment with which the modernizing state had to contend."[37] Reza sought to achieve his goals by neutralizing the tribes with intense military action, personally determine who served in what position, control all political aspects of the new system, and subdue civic opposition.[38]

Both Turkey and Iran sought to attain radically different political orders than had previously been in place and did so in a manner where, "individuals came to personify systems; politics (were) relegated to the domain of personal relations; and institutions assumed only secondary importance, to be bent and shaped in whatever way the nation's father (Atatürk & Reza) willed."[39] While not without their notable successes, these systems were "brittle and bound to fall with the slightest tilt in the balance of power," according to political historian of the Middle East Mehran Kamrava.[36] The struggles faced and addressed with suppressive measures by Turkey and Iran in an attempt to cultivate a national identity would come to the sociopolitical forefront of the region as nations achieved independence from imperialist rule.

### 1948 UN Partition Plan

Political turmoil and the spread of nationalism across the region were highly influenced by Zionist nationalism and the resulting 1948 UN Palestinian Partition Plan. The plan sought to address the Arab-Jewish conflicts in the region that had come increasingly to the forefront through Zionist efforts to return to their deemed homeland over the early-midcentury. Jewish migration came in waves and numbers and sentiments
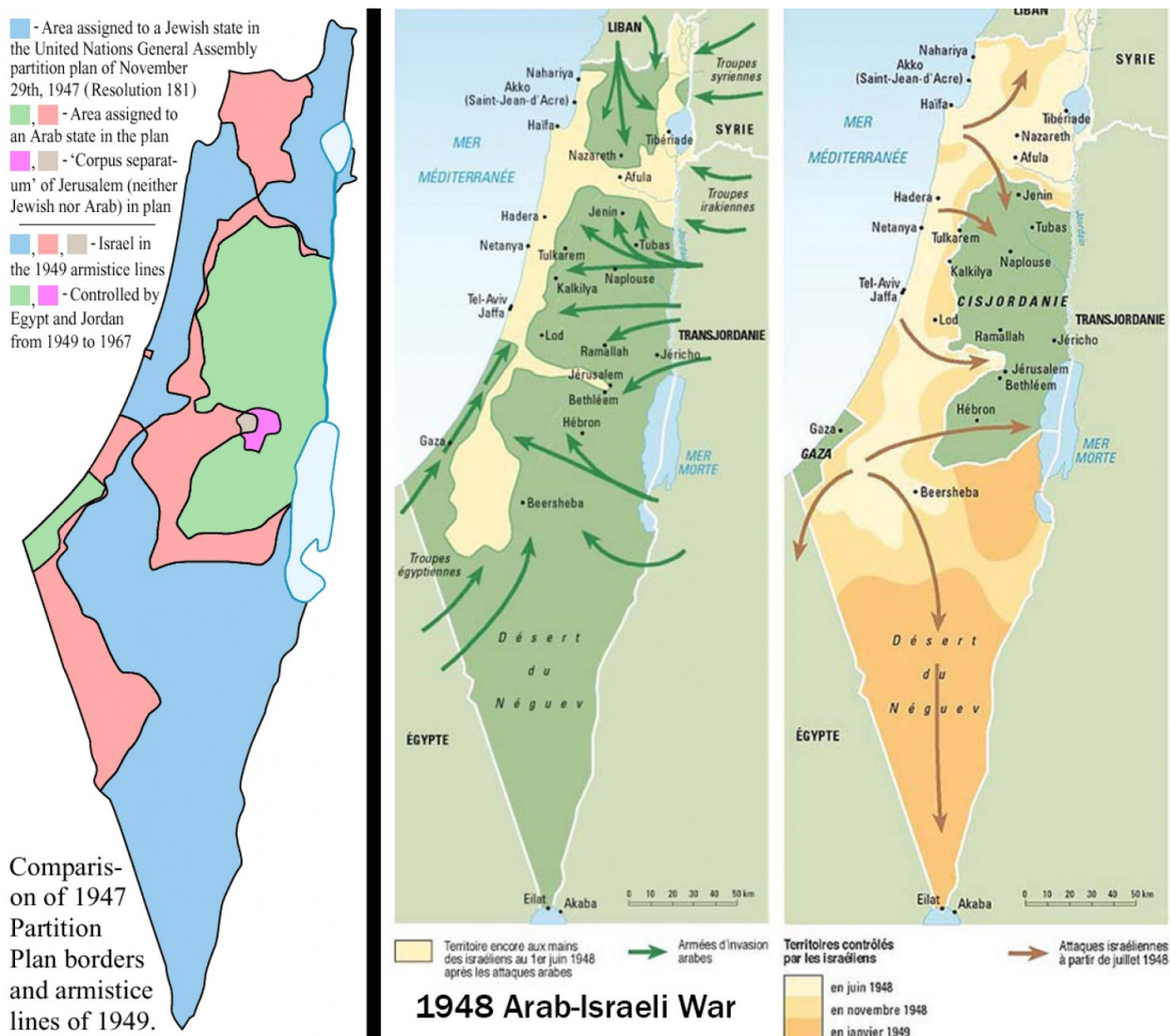
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[37] (Kamrava 2011, pg. 60)
[38] (Kamrava 2011, pg. 62 & 63)
[39] (Kamrava 2011, pg. 68)

only increased during WWII with Hitler's persecution of the Jewish people. Continued

and uncontrollable attacks upon alternate factions and the British colonial presence

forced Great Britain to turn the decision over to the UN. The resulting plan would outrage

Palestinians as it awarded the Zionists an immense swath of land disproportionate to their

population and prior ownership, and left the Palestinians displaced with largely unfertile

land. Additionally, much of the newly appointed Zionist (henceforth Israeli) allotted

territory was inhabited by Palestinians, resulting in the exodus of some 520,000—

1,000,000 Palestinians.[40] The humiliation and outrage would soon spread across the

region and Arab countries began acting on their rage by invading the newly appointed

Israeli territory hours after its conception. The 1948 Arab-Israeli war would only result in

further loss of Arab land, holding onto the Gaza Strip and the West Bank only.

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[40] (Kamrava 2011, pg. 84)

Comparison of 1947 Partition Plan borders and armistice lines of 1949.

1948 Arab-Israeli War

[41] (Fisher 2014)

The first Arab-Israeli War of 1948 set the region's narrative at largely the same time the majority of the region shed its imperialist influences. This military defeat and failure to restore Palestinians back to their homeland marred the Arab world, and nationalism was seen as the answer to their embarrassment and outcries.[42] Post-UN Partition Plan nationalism would only intensify and increasingly shape the politics of the region for years to come. Nationalism throughout the region became increasingly

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[41] (Fisher 2014)
[42] (Kamrava 2011, pg. 91)

militaristic, began to shift towards a Pan-Arab nationalism ideology, and would

increasingly become associated with modernity and the irradiation of traditional

sociopolitical influencers which were viewed as contributors to their failure.[41]

Nationalism as a sociopolitical response answered calls for unity, economic stability and

a reliable state structure.

In the following excerpt, Hourani outlines the product of independence in the

region: instability due to the lack of a political tradition, encouraging the army or other

militarist offshoots to grasp power, and defining social and governmental norms with

heavy handed repression — all the while largely ignoring the inherent complexities.

Hourani's passage speaks to the nationalist/authoritarian responses across the region.

> Independence has often led to instability, and that for various reasons:
> because of the absence of a political tradition, which encourages the
> army to take power as the only force standing above sectional
> interests; because, once independence is achieved, the relations of
> social forces with each other and with the relations of government
> have to be redefined; because of the absence of the restraining and
> stabilizing power of an imperial government; and, in some Arab
> countries, because of a discrepancy between the frontiers of the state
> and those of the dominant national idea.[43]

Nationalism within the region, such as that in Egypt under Nasser, reflected the region-

wide militarist and authoritarian nationalist regimes rising to power, and heavy handedly

asserting a national identity representative of their leader. This increasingly militarist

nature of nationalism fits with sociologist Max Weber's notion that nationalism involved

"loyalty to an authority who holds a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical

force."[44] The rigidity provided a sense of order—an inherently human desire that was,

under the Ottoman Empire, provided for in daily life as well as within the bounds of

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[43] (Hourani 1981, pg. 188)
[44] (Weber 2011)

authority by the divine–but largely lacked under questionably legitimate imperialist regimes and the early days of independence.

Nasser's rise to power followed the Free Officers military coup of the politically and militarily incompetent King Farouk in 1952, as a response to his failures during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Nasser would not assume the role of President of Egypt for a few years to come, but his nationalist influences on the formation of the newly declared Republic ruled state of Egypt were unequivocal. It was his leadership within the Free Officers that had led to the coup and end of British imperialism, and it would be his vision that largely shaped the nationalist resulting state. Post-coup, a transition period was staged where political parties were outlawed and the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) was declared the ruling party, which would strictly and militarily enforce the suppression of social and political divisions, with the goal of formulating a national identity. Much like that of Turkey's ruler Atatürk, Nasser would become a beloved figure whose presence, rhetoric, charisma, and views would assume the forefront of the political and ideological face of the new Egypt.[45] Nasser was nationalism personified, bringing Egypt out of the decrepit past with aspects of modernization and secular rule at the forefront of his message.

Nasser's treatment of the Muslim Brotherhood, a politically active group founded on the concept that Islam should govern both the individual and the state, exemplifies the secular—non-secular struggle and stifling suppression of divisions of thought under nationalist leaders mid-twentieth century. The Muslim Brotherhood, initiated in 1928, asserted an initial mission to re-educate Muslims who had lost touch with their faith

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[45] (Kamrava 2011, pg. 94)

because of Western influences on the region. The organization gained momentum and

followers rapidly and were the most potent group protesting the British-backed

monarchy pre-1952 coup.[46] The Muslim Brotherhood backed the coup, believing the

Free Officers mission for a new government would include a foundation in Islam. The

failure for that goal to come to fruition under the new secular government caused unrest

amongst the Brotherhood, and an attempt on Nasser's life was made by an extremist

member. Without haste, Nasser imprisoned large numbers of the Brotherhood and exiled

them from the political sphere. While they remained suppressed under Nasser, they

increasingly gained support as the standing government continued to economically,

socially, and militarily disappoint. Despite Nasser's attempts to quell social and political

involvement by the Muslim Brotherhood and resistance groups like them, the

Brotherhood maintains influence on Egyptian society into the present day.

     Nasser's Egypt would be representative of the nationalist movements occurring

across the region during this time, not only creating a sense of nationalism, but fostering

a "Pan-Arab" identity, largely in response to the humiliating loss of Palestine and the

subsequent war and additional losses to the newly formed Israel. Nasser's voice

reverberated across the region as the answer—spouting impressive military force, a

united identity of the Arab people, as well as the perception of modernism—all

identifiable strands of nationalism. The United Arab Republic formed between Syria and

Egypt and similar alliances formed across the region as Pan-Arab nationalism spread.

     Nasser's eventual downfall would come with the devastating blow during the Six

Day War of 1967. Continued outrage and stressed relations from the 1948 War escalated

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[46] (Laub 2014)

to the point where Egypt, Syria, and Jordan attacked Israel, only to suffer immense losses of their military forces and of land to Israel. From this blow, no longer would the unifying notion be to liberate the Palestinians. Arabs were more humiliated and militarily defeated than before, and their unifying goal would shift to be that of reclaiming the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the West Bank -- all lost during the Six Day War of 1967. While Nasserism would come to an end, Nasser's lasting legacy of nationalism would continue.

Political instability, faltering economies, military humiliation, and failure rocked Egypt and much of the region post-1967. The 1973 Yom Kippur War was a subsequent response to the 1967 War, and one that would result in a ceasefire with unclear winners. Despite the lack of clarity in an outcome, Egypt's new leader Sadat (ruled 1970-1981) declared it a military victory, returning the Sinai and a level of pride to the Egyptians. No longer was Israel perceived as invincible by Arab forces. The Yom Kippur War would pave the way for the Camp David Accords agreement signed in 1979 between Egypt and Israel, an internationally perceived victory and one that addressed much of the conflict between Egypt and Israel as well as providing a framework for Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and Gaza. However, the Accords failed to address many of the lasting ills between Israel and its other Arab neighbors. The Camp David Accords also isolated Egypt from its Arab coalition, as the perceived Arab nationalist leader secured a solution for his own country only.

## A Turn Towards Fundamentalism

Dr. Henry Munson outlines fundamentalism as a "type of militantly conservative religious movement characterized by the advocacy of strict conformity to sacred

texts."[47] Fundamentalists assert that religion encompasses all aspects of life; they advance literal interpretations of holy texts and assert religious principles maintain authority or set a moral foundation for both society and the governing body.[48] Munson asserts that the variances between fundamentalist groups are broad; some resort to terrorism while others do not, but that most "insist on a conformity to a code of conduct based on a literal interpretation of sacred scripture."[49] As will be articulated in the following sections, the transition of fundamentalism towards militancy came as a "rejection of secular modernity" and those initial roots came to the forefront during the Iranian Revolution.[50]

The Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979 was a popular revolution against the standing monarchy led by Ayatollah Khomeini and expressed in a manner differing from the trending nationalist responses prevalent across the region midcentury. Unlike other nationalist movements across the region that were largely secular, the Iranian Revolution would prove an entire overhaul of the established political order with a theocratic system and Islam providing the uniting force.[51] Years prior to the revolt, Khomeini denounced Mohammad Reza, the Western- backed Shah, for his forward, Western policies. Khomeini was arrested multiple times and finally exiled by the Shah. Khomeini continued his fight against the Shah, now with more popularity from his place of exile, and smuggled his works into Iran. The Shah's treatment of the Ayatollah only served to

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[47] (Munson 2016)
[48] (Munson 2016)
[49] (Munson 2016)
[50] (Munson 2016)
[51] (Smith 1996, pg. 47)

increase the popularity of his calls away from the Shah's purported destruction of Islam in Iran.

Andreas Armborst outlines the differences between Islamic nationalists and Islamic fundamentalists, with the premise that nationalist institution methodology is similar to that identified as Islamic nationalism, "unlike Islamic nationalists who try to assert Islamic ethics and morals top down through state institutions, the Islamic fundamentalists approach the same goal from the bottom up, that is, through religious propagation."[52] The catalysts for change were largely those of disgruntlement towards the Shah's Western-backed policies as well as resistance to the harsh, oppressive, and corrupt regime -- where social injustices abounded and in fact prevailed. The monarchy of Iran was effective at shutting down political resistances and local movements were suppressed. As Christian Smith argues, Islam was unavoidably the answer—Islamic groups across Iran had thousands of followers, no underground resistance was necessary as Islam provided the desired authority, leaders were perceived as untouchable, members ranged from all realms of society, religious centers served as a base, and relationships between the clergy and society were strong.[53]

The fall of the regime would come February 2, 1979, and the establishment of the theocratic Islamic State of Iran would follow. The Iranian Revolution, mobilized by Islam, capitalized on social and political grievances that were widely held across the socioeconomic spheres of Iran. The turn towards traditional and fundamentalist values served to counter Western influence on the government and its exploitation of the people, as well as addressed their grievances with the oppressive monarchy.

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[52] (Armborst 2014, pg. 243)
[53] (Smith 1996, pg. 51)

A similar turn of political movement towards Islamic fundamentalism occurred in Afghanistan in response to the leftist overthrow of the government in 1978 and the establishment of a communist regime. The new government profoundly lacked popular support and thus sought out assistance from the Soviet Union. Pockets of rebellions began to form, particularly as the Soviet efforts increasingly came by way of military action.

The core of the rebellion found its basis in the secularization and advanced modernization practices put forward by the new communist government. The Muslim fighters known as "mujahideen," supported by the United States, were able to resist Soviet forces which led to the eventual signing of the Geneva Accords of April 14, 1988, stipulating the withdrawal of Soviet forces. As one of the mujahideen factions, the Taliban rose in popularity with the promise of stability and the strict enforcement of the rule of law. Similar to the response in Iran, the Taliban was a reversion to Islamic fundamentalism that experienced widespread support. After extended turmoil, the 1992 overthrow of President Najibullah and the communist regime by the mujahideen led to an Afghani civil war that concluded with the establishment of the Taliban as the ruling regime by September 1996.

**Iraq-Iran War**

Tension between Iran and Iraq mounted as fear of a popular revolution in Iraq gained footing as Iran's revolution ensued. Under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, Iraq invaded Iran in hopes of a quick domination over what he perceived as Iran's fragile political order. What was supposed to be a rapid and total domination, transpired from 1980—1988 and ended in a cease-fire with little clarity of a dominant force. The

economic ramifications of the long and drawn out war were significant and would prompt Iraq to invade Kuwait—annexing Kuwait and claiming them a providence of Iraq, to be exploited for their oil surpluses. A rapid and effective U.S. led counter-insurgency was employed, expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The political, social, and economic ramifications would resonate within these countries and the region for years to come.

It was around this time when Shi'ite and Kurdish minority groups in Iraq, strong-handedly oppressed under Saddam, separately rebelled against the state. Much like other ethnic and religious minority rebellions against a state in the region, these rebellions came in response to a harsh autocratic and oppressive regime at a time when the regime appeared weakened and endured mutual civic grievance. Saddam shut down the Shi'ite movement rapidly, and the Kurdish oppression followed—but shutting this movement down was not completed without first inflicting great harm on the Kurdish population, causing an international outcry at the slaughter. The distress of the Iraqi people, who had gone from a nation at war, to a nation at war with itself, was evident.

## Disconnect of the 1990s

The Gulf War brought an end to any lasting thoughts of Arab unity throughout the region and the 1990s up to the early 2000s brewed disconnect among states in the region as each state pursued their own agenda. The region lacked a Nasser-esque leader promoting such a vision and the idea of an Arab identity dissipated as the need to promote self interests, such as countering faltering economies, thrived.[54] As evident in the Iran Revolution and as would increasingly become apparent, the political power

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[54] (Kamrava 2011, pg. 192)

vacuum left as Pan-Arabism dissipated would be filled by political and fundamentalist Islam.[55]

## Failures of the 20th Century

The Middle East throughout the 20th century faced immense sociopolitical change and political turmoil. From the power void capitalized and exploited on by Western imperialism at the fall of the Ottoman Empire, to the emergence and expansion of nationalism and associated modernization programs under repressive and corrupt autocracies, the environment fostered by the creation of Israel to the resultant return to Islamic fundamentalism left insurgencies a viable option, as secular state systems fostered repeated failure. These reasons, amongst others, have contributed to the unrest in the region into the 21st century as these failures instigated further political unrest, social disgruntlement, and mounting economic catastrophes.[56] With the turn of the century, 9/11 sparked increasing Western responses to the Middle Eastern conflict—US led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq proved short-lived success with results fostering an environment increasingly susceptible to fundamentalist organization influence.[57]

State failures and insurgencies of the 20th century and into the 21st century have evolved out of sociopolitical catalysts for institutional change with the major categories being: internal politics, international factors, civil unrest, solidarity/commonality, and socioeconomic factors.[58] As highlighted throughout this analysis of the 20th century, the susceptibility of the Middle East to Sunni Islamic fundamentalist groups is part of a series of reactions in response to a collection of cultural, political, and social breakdowns across

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[55] (Kamrava 2011, pg. 194)
[56] (Rahnema 2008, pg. 490)
[57] (Rahnema 2008, pg. 495)
[58] (Pelletier, et al. pg. 878)

time and throughout the region.[59] The purpose of the scrutiny of the 20$^{th}$ century in this analysis is to explore the region's evolution of reactions to the perpetual catalysts for institutional change. These catalysts for institutional transformation are highlighted below.

**Table 3.** Specific Islamic State catalysts for institutional transformation.

| Catalyst category | Specific catalyst |
|---|---|
| Internal politics | • Harsh autocratic governments<br>• Corrupt governments<br>• Secularism<br>• Emergence of a alternative leader<br>• Separate rules for leadership vs. populace<br>• Governments not applying principles of religious-morality to national life |
| International factors | • Western influence on government and ideals<br>• Access to propaganda related to U.S.-led/supported attacks and policies against Muslims |
| Civil unrest | • Internal Turmoil<br>• Divisiveness in region<br>• Social movement having success on battlefield |
| Solidarity/ commonality | • Desire to be part of something big<br>• Desire to return to Caliphate<br>• Desire for global unity among Muslims<br>• Hatred of U.S. and Israel<br>• Desire to expel occupiers/infidels<br>• Belief world economic structure subordinates/ disadvantages Muslims to West<br>• Desire for revenge<br>• Perception of Western persecution of Muslims<br>• Perception of Western misunderstanding of Muslims<br>• Interpretation of *Jihad* as Holy War |
| Socioeconomic | • Extreme poverty<br>• High unemployment<br>• Youth Bulge |
| Mobilizing structures | • Availability of mosques as organizing place<br>• Accessibility of social media as recruiting/ messaging tool<br>• Wide access to works by Islamic extremists |

*Sources:* (Morris),[69] (Bayat),[70] (Burhani).[71]

(Pelletier, et al. 2016, pg. 878)

## Flawed States in the 21$^{st}$ Century

While the catalysts for change have remained largely the same over time, perpetuated by continued institutional failure, and having continued into the 21$^{st}$ century—as demonstrated in Iraq and Afghanistan pre-21$^{st}$ century -- it is the turn to fundamentalism as the sociopolitical vehicle of reaction which has achieved prominence

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[59] (Pelletier, et al. 2016, pg. 877)

in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Understanding this point is important when evaluating the success of IS and similar extremist Sunni organizations and understanding the draw to such organizations.

The success of extremist organizations is fueled not simply by the ideology of fundamentalism, but is a deeply rooted sociopolitical reaction to perpetual institutional problems that have had reverberating ramifications across the political, social, and economic spheres. As Bernard Haykel persuasively summarizes, "while ideology plays a role in shaping the actions of these groups, jihadism is also a product of a history of misrule, brutal authoritarianism, and the recent marginalization of Sunni populations in the Arab world."[60]

## Afghanistan War

The US war with Afghanistan began with the goal of eliminating Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda as well as taking down the Afghanistan ruling regime, the Taliban, for playing hostess to this extremist organization. While these goals were rapidly obtained, war in Afghanistan would last for over thirteen years—becoming the longest war the U.S. has ever seen, as the goals for the Afghan occupation altered and expanded. Despite concerted efforts by the US and the NATO-framework *International Security Assistance Force* to establish and stabilize a new government, they were not prominent and persuasive enough to secure a stable state that dissolved influence on society by the Taliban, which to this day remains an insurgent force with some level of influence, wreaking havoc on the Western-established Afghan government. Some account the shifting mission of the operations in Afghanistan to "counterterrorism to nation building

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[60] (Haykel 2016, pg. 79)

to counterinsurgency" as a large part of the issue, as well as the differences in goals between the United States and Afghanistan.[61]

Post-Afghanistan War, the state of Afghanistan fares little to no better than before. Government corruption is immense, with a 2010 UN survey reporting that one out of every two Afghan adults paid kickback bribes to government officials to obtain basic public services, paying over $2.5 billion, equating to over 23 percent of the country's GDP.[62] Afghan security forces also remain corrupt and ineffective at upholding the rule of law, the government remains autocratic and representatives' loyalties lie with officials above them rather than the citizens themselves. The rampant instability perpetuates the failure to secure a stabile national economy that does not rely on international support.[54] What social infrastructural successes exist are unlikely to sustain longevity while the government remains dependent upon financial patronage of international agencies. This issue is apparent by government expenditures which exceed domestic revenues three fold, and two-thirds of that budget originates with international aid sources.[54]

The issues that have perpetuated throughout US occupation of Afghanistan and into the present day continue to de-legitimize state authority and continue to inspire the missions of fundamentalist Sunni Islamic organizations such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda as they continue to provide an already established body of legitimacy—religious authority that provides unity across the sociopolitical stratosphere (nonetheless, it is duly noted that there was success in reducing al-Qaeda into a fraction of what it used to be, due to international military action). Paired with the region's history of non-state actors

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[61] (O'Connell 2015, pg. 316-321)
[62] (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2010); no evidence of improvement since is to be found.

and organizations rebelling against failing states to achieve more stabilized economic, political, and social infrastructure, the draw towards fundamentalist Sunni Islamic organizations is not an unfamiliar catalyst of change within the region. Notably, however, al-Qaeda it is not the only fundamentalist actor within the region.

**Iraq War**

The US war with Iraq, initiated by President Bush in March 2003 on the false premises that Iraq was in possession of chemical weapons and that the ruling regime had ties to al-Qaeda, would result in the dissolution of the ruling Iraqi Ba'ath party and lead to the extermination of President Saddam Hussein. Much like that of the Afghanistan war, initial results appeared successful, but the long term mission and outcomes would prove controversial at best, and at worst, an abysmal failure. The goal was to create a democratic state system representative of the diverse makeup of Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia populations. Similar to other power vacuums created by the elimination of an authoritative regime, the fall of Saddam did not result in a peaceful acquisition of a representative democracy, but instead resulted in the warring of sectarian factions—in this instance the majority fell between Shia and Sunnis. Tensions between factions only increased with the election of Nouri al-Maliki as Prime Minister in 2005. Maliki's policies increased tensions, alienating the Sunni minority—building upon Sunni disenfranchisement felt by the US dissolution of the Baath party and elimination of all military and political Baath party members from elite positions during early US occupation.

The de-Baathification of Iraq's military and political spheres would prove to be a large contributor to the formation and success of ISIL (to expand to ISIS and then the

Islamic State) and enhance leadership with these trained military and politically eloquent previous Baath party members. The Baath party had come to power after the 1968 coup, where Saddam played a large role. The party was known for its radical Arab nationalist stance, particularly against the Palestine dilemma. The party rapidly gained members, condemning imperialist governments, purporting Islam, and drawing on members from all classes. The disenfranchisement of the widely recognized Baath party from elite positions within the state and across the realm of influence after the US invasion of Iraq insured their resistance against the new authorities. The instability prevalent still today in Iraq speaks to the failure to establish a stable government and subsequent failure to provide social and political stability and a viable economic infrastructure. Summarized effectively, "the Iraq War's greatest lesson and legacy: there was no political corollary to America's overwhelming military power." (287)

The withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011 saw an almost immediate rise of insurgencies amongst the various factions, particularly within the Sunni community with regard to the Shia led government and exclusionary policies. The rise of ISIS followed, expounding upon the anger towards sectarian policies and the continued failed nature of the state.

### Modernization and Political Islamic Fundamentalism

It is increasingly evident that the Sunni Islamic fundamentalism employed by extremist organizations in the Middle East is correlated with the failed attempts to construct state structures that support political, social, and economic stability within the region. Where religion used to provide authority and legitimacy to society, modernity brought with it the rise and employment of reason to provide legitimacy to the state

authority.[63] Modernization brought the secularization of states and subsequent

suppression of political opposition and religious factions, large expenditures on

infrastructure, and often times heavy reliance on Western powers to finance such

projects. In the long run this led largely to economic disparities, over-expansion, rapid

urban growth in population while lacking the infrastructure and economic stability to

support, and an increasingly wide gap between the rich and the poor—where some

benefitted, most saw the advancement of modernity as an advancement of inequality.[64]

These are some aspects brought to the region by modernization that would, in the long

run, prove to cause increased instability in many instances and contribute to the turn

towards Sunni Islamic fundamentalism as a solution.

### Arab Spring

For the greater purpose of this analysis, a contracted review of the Arab Spring

demonstrates a popular uprising against a series of repressive regimes across the Middle

East and North African regions, largely based on authoritarian regime failure to address

economic uncertainty, mass numbers of educated but unemployed and dissatisfied youth,

and deplorable living conditions. The Arab Spring called for freedom from repressive and

corrupt regimes with replacement by democratic governments. While there occurred a

series of overthrows of authoritative regimes, today most of these nations remain turmoil
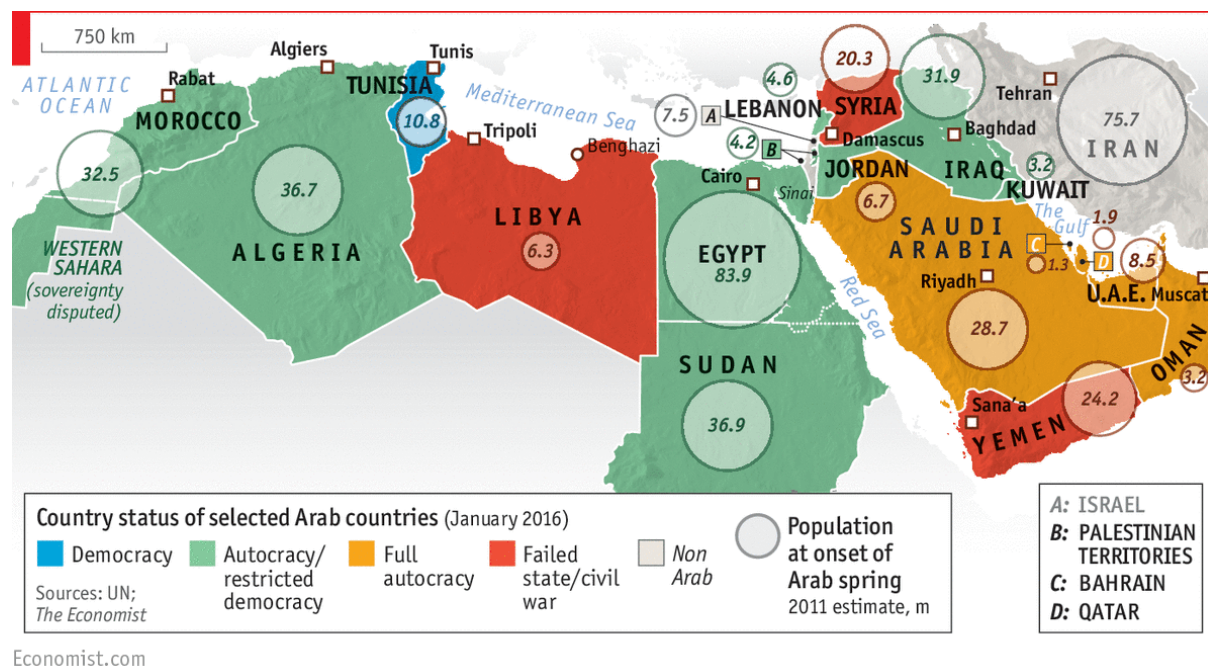
ridden and undemocratic.

Arguably, the Arab Spring, by failing to produce the desired responses, has

created additional crevices within society and the state authorities for extremist

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[63] (Tepe 2008, pg. 33)
[64] (Tepe 2008, pg. 43)

organizations to exploit.[65] Syria demonstrates the expansion of turmoil since the Arab

Spring, contracting into a civil war without the success of an overthrow of the Assad

regime. Hundreds of thousands have been killed, millions have been internally and

externally displaced, and even more require humanitarian aid.[60] Not unfamiliar to civil

wars, a series of rebel factions have formed or expanded into Syria and wreak havoc on

the state, with IS being the most prominent non-state actor. There is no sign pointing

towards the acquisition of a democratic future for Syria in the immediate future. In Libya,

a similar situation of turmoil without democratic avail persists. The takedown of the

brutal dictator Moammar Gadhafi in October of 2011 resulted in the implosion of the

central state. The power void resulted in civil war that exists still today with warring rebel

militias. IS has seeped into Libya and maintains some level of influence despite US

attempts to eradicate them. These are not rare results of the Arab Spring; as of right now

only Tunisia has achieved the sought after outcome of the revolt against authoritarian

regimes sparking from the Arab Spring.

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[65] (Benson 2015)

**Country status of selected Arab countries** (January 2016)

- Democracy
- Autocracy/restricted democracy
- Full autocracy
- Failed state/civil war
- Non Arab
- Population at onset of Arab spring 2011 estimate, m

Sources: UN; The Economist

A: ISRAEL
B: PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES
C: BAHRAIN
D: QATAR

Economist.com

(The Economist 2016)

**Politicization of Religiosity**

The religious, political, and societal turmoil of the 20th century accrued over the century, expressed as political disgruntlement in different forms of responses, initially by way of nationalism, in response to imperialist incursions and the establishment of imperially-endorsed political regimes. As nationalist state systems also failed to secure desired stability, fractures within society spawned fundamentalistic religious rebellions with thoroughly subversive political agendas. [66] While this analysis focuses largely on politicized Sunni Islam organizations, politicized religiosity takes many shapes within the Middle East and outside of the region as well.

Understanding the politicization of religiosity requires the understanding that religion offers not only a system of morals to live by, but also "claims to offer a superior understanding of social reality, justice, order, and stability," as well as provide the

vehicle by which social and political change may be achieved.[67] Consider the Euthyphro

dilemma proposed by Socrates which addresses moral righteousness—is something

right/morally good because it is commanded by God, or because it is intrinsically

right/morally good? Is the legitimacy of authority conceived from the divine or from

reason? "Humans are cause-seeking, purpose-forming, storytelling animals…we find

patterns in nature and look for the hidden springs and principals," as with making sense

of the world around us and making sense of authority—of which both promotes our best

interest and limits our capacities—is an inherently human notion.[68] When considering the

basis for authority and the basis for challenging authority, the debate of divine right and

authority versus inherent right and authority is directly pertinent and plays into the

conflict between secular states and fundamentalist religious rebellions today.

Authority finds its initial basis in the acceptance by those over whom it governs.

If those abiding by the authority feel it does not support their best interests or it continues

to fail to provide what is sought from the implied obedience associated with abiding by

state authority, rebellion is not not an unusual response. Bolstering this idea is Max

Weber's concept that state authority is "rooted in its capacity to enforce power through

the use of socially approved bloodshed—in police authority, capital punishment, and

armed defense—religion is the only other entity that can give moral sanction for violence,

it is therefore at least potentially revolutionary."[69]

Religious rebellions thrive as a proposed alternative to the standing political

authority (at least initially), as they provide an alternative to secular authority that is well-

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[67] (Tepe 2008, pg. 52)
[68] (Atran 2010, pg. 434)
[69] (Juergensmeyer 2008, pg. 255)

understood, legitimized, and respected across the sociopolitical sectors  in the Middle

East region.[70] Sultan Tepe's Crisis Model advocates that these groups are "reacting to

modernity by asserting tradition" in the face of "growing disillusionment with secular

nationalism and problems of legitimacy in the existing regimes."[71] As secular,

authoritative regimes, emulate the perception of failure with regard to societal

expectations for economic welfare or political freedom or state stability, fundamental

religious rebellious movements have gained traction, filling the ideological and political

voids.

As a region richly steeped in a history of religious influence in all aspects of life,

mobilizing religion as a facilitator for political change speaks to a broad audience—

spanning social divisions, generating legitimacy, and offering a rich history with the

ability to provide an alternative authority to secular ruled nations that failed to provide for

the desired stability.

> Religion carries a significant capacity to influence political
> beliefs and participation, given its symbolic system,
> organizational structure, and the power to affect the public
> imagination with historically entrenched allegories…includes
> five important ideational and behavioral constructs directly
> affecting politics: order, commitment, ritual, common allegories,
> and the sense of history.[72]

While Sunni extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda, IS, and Boko Haram vary in

tactics, goals, etc., there remains a common linkage of their missions—to "create a

popular uprising, destroy Western influence, and reestablish the caliphate system."[73]

Seeking a Sunni fundamentalist response became the fitting resolution as regimes proved

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[70] (Rausch 2015)
[71] (Tepe 2008, pg. 45)
[72] (Tepe 2008, pg. 57)
[73] (Rausch 2015)

to fail time and again, perpetuating social injustice, lack of stability, injustice and corruption, and disorder. "Fundamentalism breeds in a vacuum of intellectual political discourse, when the authoritarianism of the state makes it impossible to discuss and examine complex social and political problems in a reasoned manner."[74] As repressive, ineffective, and nondemocratic regimes continue into the 21st century, the politicization of religion in an extreme fundamentalist form represents a channel providing an attempt at region-wide recognition of legitimacy and authority.

## Summary

This analysis seeks to address the sociopolitical happenings, with particular focus on the 20th century, that have come to influence the susceptibility of the region to Sunni Islamic fundamentalist organizations. Historic influencers have greatly amplified the region's susceptibility to insurgency by fundamentalist organizations, undermining and calling to question the legitimacy of state authority. While this inquiry falls far short of providing an in-depth examination of the history of the Middle East or a sufficient breakdown of the modern nations' individualized difficulties, it seeks to provide an overview of the complexities involved, in hopes of better understanding their self-replicating sociopolitical pathologies.

A brief glance at the Ottoman Empire demonstrates a decentralized, provincially based governmental system that reigned for multiple centuries across a vast region deeply divided by religious and ethnic factions. Yet political unity was sustained and arguably a religion-based political order was the glue holding it together. The drastic divestment from this system towards the imperialism that followed would result in the rise of a

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[74] (Kamrava 2011)

myriad of social, political, economic, religious, and cultural issues across the region. Self-advancing, short-sighted, and uninformed decisions made by imperialist powers would set the stage for continued conflicts over the coming century.

Nationalism would formulate across the region as a reactionary measure to imperialism—as a backlash against imperialist exploitation, failure to address social, political, and cultural divisions, and growing feelings of resentment. As conflict only proved to increase, nationalism would increasingly become militaristic and suppressive in nature. But over time secular nationalist regimes would prove a failure at meeting social, economic, and political expectations—proving a disgrace and enhancing feelings of resentment towards the established authority. The modernization that flourished under nationalist regimes suppressed religious and political differences and proved to advance inequality and social distance in class groups. The fundamentalistic politicized religious responses that would come to rise were viewed by a significant portion of the population as an alternative to the standing states and their failures to address the perpetual political and ideological voids.

The politicization of religiosity has seen levels of success by way of fundamentalist insurgency groups as authority asserted with divine backing and the promise to fill political, social, economic, cultural, and religious divisions is asserted. In a region where secular authorities have demonstrated an inability to provide stabilized governments that meet the needs of the people while accounting for the complexities of the region, fundamentalist backlashes with a basis of authority rooted in the divine in a region with a rich history of religious authority is not surprising.

   The purpose of this analysis is not to provide utopian solutions steeped in Western ideals, but is an attempt to shed light on the complexity of the region, about which considerable amounts of the Western world are woefully uninformed. This exploration reviews the overarching difficulties that have perpetuated particularly over the last century with failed states and failed outside influencers. In order for the region to attempt to secure a more stabile region, the inherent social, cultural, religious, political, and economic difficulties need to be addressed and stabilized states enhancing these elements should be cultivated and supported.

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Ginger Wenzel Kieffer was born in Caribou, Maine on July 19, 1994. She was raised in Caribou and graduated from Caribou High School in 2013. Majoring in political science, Ginger has minors in legal studies and leadership studies, graduating Summa Cum Laude. She is a member of Pi Sigma Alpha and All Maine Women. She was a 2015 Honors College Sustainable Food Systems Research Fellow and a 2016 Peter Madigan '81 Congressional Intern to United States Senator Susan Collins.

Upon graduation, Ginger plans to work for Senator Collins as a Staff Assistant in her Lewiston, ME office.