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Syrian Revolution

How the Road from Democracy Ended in a Caliphate

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Introduction

In October 2013, two and a half years since the people in Syria rose up in revolt to bring down the regime of President Bashar al Assad and establish a democratic system of government, Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri urged rebel fighters from the various factions and splinter groups of the armed opposition to fight together, "to establish a *jihadist* Islamic country in Syria and restore the Islamic Caliphate."[1] In less than a year, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Caliphate in the territory captured by his militant *jihadist* group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (known as ISIS or now IS) straddling Syria and Iraq. ISIS became the first terror group in the Levant region to hold territory, govern it as per the Islamic religious laws and resurrect the concept of an Islamic state, 90 years after the last such state was dismantled by the reformist leader Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in1924 which began the creation of modern day Turkey. The Arab Spring uprising in Syria which began as a nation's fight for freedom from the despotic rule of the Assad clan has upturned into a Salafi-*jihadist* insurgency.

Located in the heart of West Asia, Syria has been embroiled in a whirlpool of political volatility and instability since its independent establishment from French colonisation in 1946. A decade later, in 1963, with the Ba'ath Party in power, it emerged as a modern, secular state ruled by the authoritarian leader Hafez al Assad (from here on referred to as Assad), whose firm grip on the society and its populace projected a sense of stability. Despite being an Islamic country, with over 70 per cent Sunni Muslims, Syria's image internationally remained that of a liberal and Westernised state ruled under the iconic personality of Assad whose Ba'ath Party was one of the first in the Arab world to work towards women's emancipation. Internally, the country remained in the grip of sectarian and ethnic faultlines, as the Assad regime manoeuvred religion and politics for its own survival. He soon earned credibility among the international community as a strong Arab leader who fought religious extremism—'terrorism'—at home, thus, preventing Islamisation of Syria. In reality, he supported terrorism externally as part of Syria's foreign

policy which would make it one of the earliest states sponsoring terrorism. Assad continued to rule, decade after decade, creating a stifled society with a closed market economy and authoritarian socialism. The political and economic developments in the region combined with the onslaught of technology and communication infiltrated Syria to precipitate profound changes in the social structure. Demands for greater freedom in the society and political liberalisation began challenging the decades-long rule of the Assad family. In 2011, when the Arab Spring wave reached Syria, unarmed civil uprisings of mass demonstrations with a cross-section of Syrians demanded the overthrow of the Assad regime, now in its second edition, heralded by son Bashar al Assad. The protests soon turned into a civil war as the Syrian government forces responded with a brutal crackdown and organised armed groups began forming the opposition. As Bashar lost control over large parts of Syria, the chaos of insecurity allowed many Islamist extremists and *jihadi* elements to proliferate in the country.

Four years since the local revolution in Syria has resulted in a war of attrition, causing the deaths of more than 210,000 people and displacing half of the country's population.[2] The earliest uprising has now burgeoned into a battleground for proxy wars between regional and international powers exploiting the geo-sectarian and ethnic faultlines, to widen their own spheres of influence. Internally, Syria stands divided into three parts: the Bashar held Damascus and coastal Alawite region, the autonomous territory in the north, held by the Kurds, and the Sunni Caliphate created by ISIS in the east. Iran's and Lebanon's unrestrained military, political and economic support to ensure Bashar's stay in power has fuelled a proxy war against Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey which aim to limit Iran's regional ambitions to install Shia hegemony, and to protect the interests of Sunni Muslims. Internationally, efforts to bring in a political transition and halt the violence has largely been ineffective and incoherent, with Russia and the US on opposing sides. The emergence of ISIS has further devaluated the urgency to resolve the Syrian quagmire as the Western nations seem to agree that the militant group is the bigger threat, thus, prioritising its defeat over the removal of Bashar's regime, amidst growing concerns that doing so will make Syria lapse into greater turmoil with an Islamist takeover, effectively forgetting that without the regime, the growth of ISIS would not have been possible.

How, did the uprising that began in the name of democracy lead to an extremist version of state rule based on religious laws? This paper will examine the drivers for the ongoing war through the rule of former President Hafez Assad and his son Bashar, the suppression of Islamists and secular civil society and Damascus' sponsorship of terrorism to understand how the events in the past have influenced the current situation.

Chapter 1
Resistance Against the Syrian Regime

The Syrian Arab Spring

In late 2010, when the cry for freedom, *ash-sha'b yourid isqat al-nizam* or 'the people want the regime to fall', erupted in Tunisia, its echoes were heard loud and clear across the Arab world. The Arabic word *nizam* evokes the notions of both the regime (ruler) and the system which until now has been notorious for having one of the worst civil liberties and freedom indices in the entire West Asia region. Of the 20 countries in the region, authoritarian regimes[3] in 15 states did not fulfill the basic criteria of a democracy: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. Challenging such despotic regimes that for decades maintained their rule through "an interlocking system of restrictive laws and several security apparatuses that monitor and pervade every aspect of social life to keep all potential opposition forces weak and fragmented,"[4] their rogue armies, and secret police, which until now controlled the citizens' lives—socially, politically and even individually—the youth triggered mass scale local protests and demonstrations which engulfed the decades old single party authoritarian regimes of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

Just as the murmurs of protests—a la Tunisian style[5]—had begun to be heard in the streets of Syria in January 2011, President Bashar al Assad, stood out as a confident man, as he hailed the uprisings as a "new era" in the Arab world. "We are outside of this; at the end, we are not Tunisians and we are not Egyptians,"[6] Assad said in a rare interview. The charade of Bashar's statement came to the fore in March, in the form of wall graffiti in Daraa city, located in the southern part of Syria. Imitating the signs in the Egyptian revolution, 15 school children scribbled on the city's walls, *"The people want the regime to fall."*[7] Prior to Bashar, his father Assad had remained in power until his death in 2000, and the Assad family's combined rule over Syria has been in force for more than four decades. The Syrians

had reason to believe that the radical Arab Spring wave had arrived in the Levant and it was the time to free Syria's system from the Assad family. Chants of "Allah, Syria and Freedom" replaced the once popular slogan of "Allah, Syria and Bashar." Mass demonstrations filled the streets after Friday prayers as hundreds of thousands of people across the country began protests and hunger strikes calling for political reforms, dignity, and an end of political detentions and oppression. The dissidents in Syria including the Islamists, Sunni conservatives, Nationalists, Kurds, Communists, and the common majority who had suffered decades of social, political and economic repression, came out in force to demand the removal of the regime. The goal of the uprising remained nationalist, to establish a state on democratic principles. As the unrest became more challenging to his 11-year Presidency, Bashar fell back on the legacy left by his father Assad and launched a military crackdown against the unarmed civilians. Snipers opened fire, teargas and live ammunition and killed protestors, and at other locations, Army tanks rolled in, cordoning entire neighbourhoods, erecting checkpoints to monitor movements. House-to house raids and arrests were conducted to round up dissidents in a bid to quash anti-regime protests. Bashar rejected the revolution or a spring, instead proclaiming, "It is terrorist acts in the full meaning of the word."[8] Terrorism as a term has always been used by the regime to justify its repressive policies and authoritarian nature to keep civilians or any opposing force from challenging it. It projected itself as the only legitimate state actor to fight the evils of terrorism. This was not the first time that the regime in Syria faced a significant threat by a popular uprising or that its Army declared a war against its own citizens. Both Bashar and his father Assad had in the past faced armed, civil and political resistance, attempting to pressurise the regime for changes.

Armed Resistance Against Assad: 1976-1982

a. Sunni-Alawite Clash

In 1970, when Hafez al Assad, a military General of the Ba'ath Party grabbed power in a coup, Syria was still recovering from its troubled nascent birth as an independent state marked with long periods of political instability and near anarchy. Since 1949, Syria has seen the highest number

of coups in the region: 10 coups,[9] 20 different Cabinets, and four separate Constitutions during the first ten years of democratic rule. To put a definitive end to such political turmoil [10] the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party which came to power in 1963, constitutionally helmed itself as Syria's leading political party and banned the existence of any other political ideology. The party's emphasis on 'secularism' which sought to separate religion in matters of state brought it into direct confrontation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which was the first political Islamic party of Syria. Influenced by the *Ikhwan* movement or the Muslim Brotherhood, propounded by Egypt's Hasan al Bana, the Syrian Brotherhood aimed to establish an Islamic state, including non-Muslims,[11] based on democratic structures. It enjoyed a popular run in the democratic elections, including support from Christians and Jews. By 1961, its numbers in the Parliament increased to 10 seats and ministerial posts, from four seats in the first Parliamentary elections in 1947, before the Ba'ath Party's emergence as a ruling power. The Brotherhood's appeal amongst the Sunnis was reflected in the earliest Constitution drafted soon after Syria's independence, which included the "Islamic element" requiring the "the President's religion as Islam" and "Islamic jurisprudence is the main source of legislation". Even though the Alawites are typically described as an offshoot of Shia Islam, their identification within Islam of any kind has been denied by Muslim rulers and theologians, with many even today considering the sect to be heretic. The Alawites, who were oppressed and marginalised for most of their religious history as well socially in Syria, gained prominence during the rule of the French who set up armed forces largely comprising the minorities. The Sunnis form a majority in Syria (75 per cent) but the country has a large number of minorities: the Alawites (11 per cent), Christian minorities like Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Maronite, Syrian Catholic, Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic (10 per cent), other Muslim sects, including Ismailia and *Ithna'ashari* or Twelver Shia (2 per cent) and Druze (3 percent).[12] In less than a decade, the Alawites were dominating, militarily and politically, with Assad becoming the first President from the minority. The rise of the Alawites made historian Daniel Pipes quip famously, "Alawis ruling Syria is like an untouchable becoming a maharajah in India or a Jew becoming a tsar in Russia." A large segment

of Sunni conservatives in Syria considered Assad's rule to be illegitimate by default, because of his Alawite background. Assad sought a number of *fatwas* from the Twelver Shias recognising the Alawites' affiliation within Islam. Notably, such recognition came not from the Syrian Sunnis but from foreign scholars like Musa Sadr, an Iranian-Lebanese cleric.[13] To put an end to such controversies, Assad, in 1973, sought to eliminate the Article in the Syrian Constitution which required the head of the state be a Muslim. This angered the conservatives to the extent that riots erupted in many cities, with the security forces clashing with Sunni fundamentalists, forcing Assad to restore the Article. Assad viewed the Brotherhood as a challenge to the legitimacy of his rule, and put the regime at odds with the Islamists who denounced the ruling power as an "apostate regime".

b. Islamist Insurgency

Assad's repressive policies and military power had alienated vast sections of the Syrian society.[14] The Brotherhood vowed to not put down arms till Assad was overthrown as the President. The Fighting Vanguard or el-Taliaa el Moqatila, an armed group with a militant ideology, which had earlier led an uprising in Hama in 1964, regrouped and joined hands with the Brotherhood leaders. With support from Jordan and Iraq,[15] the Brotherhood and Taliaa strategically targeted pro-regime supporters, Ba'athist members, regime officials and Alawite leaders, who were assassinated with precision, and state institutions, which were bombed with car explosives. Ticking off a direct assault against the regime in 1979, the Taalia killed 80 Syrian Alawite cadets at the artillery school in Aleppo. The following year, an assassination attempt was made on the President himself, when two grenades were thrown at him as he stepped out of his car. The retaliation that followed this act was brutally violent and aggressive. The very next day, in the Palmyra prison, Syrian forces, led by Assad's brother Rifat (later promoted as the Vice President), shot dead more than 700 prisoners who were Brotherhood supporters. In February 1982, this conflict between the Brotherhood and the regime came to a head in the city of Hama, the heartland of conservative Sunnis. Army troops laid siege to wipe out all opposition. The Islamists, in turn, gave a call for a revolution against the regime and killed over 70 Ba'athists. Hama

was declared liberated. But Assad was not one to be cowed down. A force of 12,000 troops shelled the city for more than three weeks, tanks moved in, flattening neighbourhoods and reducing them to rubble. The number of dead remains disputed from anywhere between 10,000 and 40,000. But the consensus that emerged undisputed was that the Hama massacre was the "single bloodiest assault by an Arab ruler against his own people in modern times and remains a pivotal event in Syrian history."[16] The opposition by Sunni Islamists that challenged the regime was ruthlessly eliminated and so was political Islam. Membership of the Brotherhood was made punishable by death, forcing its surviving leadership to go into exile, with the Syrian security forces brutally chasing down, persecuting and detaining any religious group with political motivations.[17] The Brotherhood organisational structure and offices within Syria were shut down and the Taalia was destroyed. The carnage stood as a warning for the dissident Syrians on the control vested by Assad in the state. The levelled grounds of Hama and its bombed buildings not only broke the Islamist insurrection but served as a savage reminder of the fate that would befall all those who dared to challenge Assad's rule. The killings terrorised the people and forced them to surrender to the will of the regime. Although public discussion about the Hama massacre was prohibited, the issue remained alive in the collective conscience of the Syrians, creating a generation of dissidents who grew up in a culture of fear and hate towards the regime.

Political and Civilian Resistance Against Bashar: The Case of the Damascus Spring, 2000-2001

When Assad died on June 10, 2000, there was no power struggle or vacuum in Syria. That the transition of power would take place to his son Bashar, who was called back from his studies in Britain, after the heir apparent Basel's death, and then groomed as the possible Presidential successor, was an open secret. The Constitution was amended to lower the age of President (from 40 to 34 years) to accommodate the young Bashar and with a popular referendum giving a 97.92 per cent voter approval, he was officially declared the President of Syria. The opportunity for a democratic transition remained elusive as Syria became the first Arab republican hereditary regime. Bashar inherited much of the political decision-making structure and the 'old guard',

the close knit circle of trusted loyalists of Ba'athists who had surrounded his father. However, Bashar chose to lead Syria in a different direction. This was evident in his first Presidential speech as Bashar promised reforms and the launching of Syria's "own democratic experience."[18] The prospects of change in Syria's stagnant society and bleak economy brought in a wave of cautious but fresh optimism amongst the Syrians.

a. The Demise of Political Thought

Democracy in Syria which had a historical role in the country's political and social life during the French mandate and in the first decade of its independence, had died a long time ago. The leftist and Communist ideology parties, which characterised Syria's early political years, went underground, and political Islam was relegated, thereby containing any domestic political challenge to the ruling regime. The National Progressive Front or al-Jabha al-Wataniyyah at-Taqaddumiyyah—a coalition of 10 political parties dominated by the Ba'ath Party—shared the seats in the Parliament, controlling a two-thirds majority. As a result, elections and voting had no effect in bringing about any change of government or governance.

b. Police State

There was no way to protest or even criticise the regime, with fear of the notorious *mukhabarat* (secret police) ruling high. Civil liberties like freedom of expression and speech came at a high price—the security and intelligence apparatus formed by the Assad regime reported and acted against, every real or generated anti-regime activity. There were more more than 48 essential security branches in addition to the regional and provincial branches of four main agencies: State or General Security, Political Security, Military Intelligence, and Air Force Intelligence.[19] These included spying on citizens and foreign nationals (including diplomats, military attaches and journalists), monitoring anti-regime activities, political dissidents, religious and ethnic minorities, social and mass organisations, and controlling corruption and drug trafficking. Each of these agencies had detention cells, interrogation centres and dozens of secret headquarters in various cities and governorates. Around 90,000 officers, mostly belonging to the Alawi sect, worked in these intelligence agencies.[20] The Emergency Law, in effect continuously since

Ba'ath Party rule began in 1963, allowed preventive detention of individuals deemed to be a risk, under the pretence of national security. It gave power to the military-controlled state security courts to try civilians. Thousands of individuals were arrested, often in secret and detained incommunicado for long terms, without any access to lawyers, and no information was provided to their families. They were subjected to trials, torture and often killed. It is hard to determine the exact number of people arrested by the security and military authorities but estimates are of over 4,500 political prisoners and reportedly 17,000 forced disappearances dating from decades.[21] Those released were made to sign a pledge that they would not engage in political activity against the regime. In a country where the media is nationalised, has no press freedom and entry of foreign journalists is restricted, human rights abuses and political tyranny made no news, giving a free hand to the regime's repression.

Resurgence of the Civil Society

Bashar's statement regarding faith in democracy and his image as a Western educated, open-minded young leader came as a breath of fresh air for the Syrians amid hopes of bringing in the long-awaited change in the controlled state. The reform movement was initiated by a number of intellectuals and civil society members who themselves had been subjected to repression in the tightly controlled society in the past such as Michel Kilo, journalist and activist, Riad Seif, businessman and former member of Parliament, Paris based academic Burhan Ghalioun, Suhair al-Atassi, founder of the Jamal al-Atassi Forum, economist Aref Dalila, lawyer Radwan Ziadeh, founder of the Syrian Organisation for Transparency, Doctor Kamal al-Labwani, and others. The period saw the emergence of as many as 70 discussion forums, and formation of Committees for the Revival of Civil Society (Lijan Ihya al-Mujtama' al-Madani), an independent, non-political movement demanding greater freedom. Many of these demands for change were summarised in a statement signed by 99 intellectuals[22] calling on the regime to end martial, law and provide greater freedom to all the citizens. In a state where it had been unthinkable to make such demands or even talk about such issues, the charter was termed as the first cry of freedom from inside autocratic Syria. In a radical change from its previous stance in the 1970s and 1980s,

the Brotherhood also joined the reformist phase. To win back the people's support, it published the "National Honour Pact for Political Work" which vowed to renounce violence in all forms, while reaffirming its faith in the democratic civil state. The goal of the civil society members and political activists of the movement was not regime change or Bashar's ouster from the Presidency but reforms in the Constitution, lifting of emergency laws and respecting human rights, and justice.

a. Bashar's Development

The regime's reaction to many of these criticisms and demands was tolerant: Bashar introduced a number of controlled economic and political reforms. Nearly 600 political prisoners were given amnesty, restrictions on the media and internet were lifted, publication of private and political dailies was allowed, a 25 percent wage increase was instituted, old bureaucratic laws were cancelled, private investment laws were approved, and private banks were allowed to open in the Free Zone area. Political reform has been a sensitive topic for Bashar who though admitting its need,[23] has remained reluctant due to fear of destabilisation, like in the collapse of the Soviet Union, on which the Syrian Ba'ath Party had modelled itself. Instead, he attempted to coopt the political activism underway in Syria by opening the Ba'ath influenced National Progressive Front (NPF) parties for recruitment and membership of political enthusiasts.[24] The move was severely rejected by the opposition movement, and members like Muhammad Sawwan and Riyad Sayif in January 2001, in defiance of the regime's ban, independently established two political parties: the Coalition for Democracy and Unity and the Movement for Social Peace.

b. The Backlash

It was around this time that the hardliners in the regime became increasingly worried that the new political activism extended by Bashar could threaten the very existence of the regime. In view of Bashar's inexperience in politics and doubts over his ability to lead the country into the era of political and economic reforms, they felt it could loosen the regime's continuing political, and military control, in turn, endangering the minority Alawites' influence. The last time this had happened was during the Islamist insurgency in the

1970s when radical Sunnis emerged as an armed opposition, threatening the regime's survival. The old guard, represented by military Generals and senior advisers from Assad's time, stepped in and reined in Bashar to ensure the regime's stability.[25] Beginning in February 2001, the regime came down hard on opposition members, the reformist policy was rolled back, and the forums and groups which it had facilitated a few months earlier were unceremoniously shut down. Bashar termed the opposition as agents of foreign powers, blamed them for affecting the stability of the homeland and asserted that he would deal with them in the same fashion as those who were enemies of the country.[26] Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Dardari, justifying the arrests and reversal of state policies, said, "The survival of this regime and the stability of this country were threatened, loud and openly."[27] The civil and political resistance in the form of the Damascus Spring remained a short-lived experience in the history of Syria's civil society but it succeeded in instilling a democratic consciousness that had been stifled by the Ba'ath Party, and gave a new voice to the Syrians. In 2005, the various opposition factions including the Nationalists, Communists, Kurdish and Brotherhood came together under the banner of the "Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change."[28] Not since the mid-1970s when the Brotherhood and radical Islamists had confronted the Assad regime with arms and posed a threat to its position in power, had the political opposition, across diverse factions of the society, made such a bold move by presenting itself as an alternative to the Bashar regime. The declaration constituted the beginning of Syria's secular political process of ending despotism to establish a democratic national regime.

Chapter 2
Politics and Religion

Religion as a Tool for Foreign Policy

Syria's policy towards the Islamists at home and in the Arab world is influenced by two parallel trajectories: to suppress any political threat which could undermine the survival of the regime; and to widen its regional power ambitions. The consecutive losses in the 1967 and 1973 Wars with Israel, and the loss of its southwestern border region of Golan Heights to the Jewish state deflated Syria's military power, making direct Israeli confrontation excessive. When Assad came to power, he saw an opportunity to exert influence in the Arab-Israeli arena by way of supporting the Palestinian groups who advocated the creation of a Palestinian state through an armed movement or the destruction of Israel – or both – in their fight for a homeland.[29] By adopting the anti-Zionist cause as its own, the regime (of both Assad and Bashar) used religion as a tool to prop up proxies to continue the war against Israel. At home, the Islamist insurgency in the 1970s was brutally crushed as it threatened to topple the regime but, at the same time, Syria, headed by the minority Shia Alawite sect, backed the Sunni groups using terror among their tactics for fulfilling their political agenda. Syria's motivation in supporting these groups is to achieve a range of political and strategic goals, to undermine the countries it opposes, the Ba'ath Party's commitment to Arab nationalism, to establish Syria's hegemony over the neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine or what is known as Greater Syria, to liberate Arab territory from foreign occupation, its continuous war against Israel and to strengthen Syria's negotiating position in the Arab-Israel peace process. Damascus viewed the Palestinian groups, including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), as resistant groups against Israel and permitted them to open their offices and operate from inside Syria. These groups found a safe haven to recruit, train, raise funds and to launch terror attacks and suicide bombings in Israel. The regime also funded the Palestinian groups and was influential in

the operational decisions. When civil war erupted in Lebanon in 1975, Syria moved its armed troops into the neighbouring country under the pretext of restoring peace and to counter Israeli dominance in its extended backyard. Syria found a strategic ally in Shiite Iran to undermine Israel. Iran's support for the militant group Hezbollah allowed Syria to attack Israel from Lebanon. Syria allowed Iran to use its territory as a training ground for Hezbollah and for supply of weapons, thus, making it a proxy power in Lebanon. It continued to hold dominant sway in Lebanon's internal politics, with the presence of armed troops, which were withdrawn in 2005. A UN investigation found that Syrian officials were involved in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, an allegation vehemently denied by the regime.[30] Similarly, the Syrian government maintained ties to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and assisted in the organisation's efforts to exert pressure against Turkey and Iraq. Syria's role in terrorism was not just limited to the West Asia region—Nezar Hindawi, a Syrian accomplice conspired to blow up Israel airliners in London in 1986—and it also had connections in Madrid. Syria's link to terrorism and its support to terror groups put it on the list of "state sponsors of terrorism", since the inception of such list in 1979.[31] At a time when Islamist resurgence was on the rise in the Muslim world, the space for Islamist opposition was virtually being wiped out in Syria—even having a long beard would make the authorities suspicious. As a result, many extremists went to Afghanistan to join the *jihad*. The presence of Syrians in both the leadership and ranks of Al Qaeda is second only to that of the Saudis.[32] A vast number of Syrian *jihadists* returned to the Gulf countries, whereas the Brotherhood and its affiliates found modest space for Islamic activism in Algeria and Jordan.[33] Many, who escaped the persecution at home, sought refuge in European countries and later came into contact with Al Qaeda members, such as the Al Qaeda cell in Madrid, which was run entirely by Syrians.[34]

Playing his Own Game: How Bashar Propped up the Iraq Insurgency

Since 2003, Syria became the principal transit point for foreign fighters, Al Qaeda operatives and *jihadi* elements headed for Iraq. Its support in facilitating foreign fighters, *jihadists* and suicide bombers stemmed from the common

ground shared by the regime in Damascus with the Islamist extremists and former Iraqi Ba'athists who had taken refuge in Syria after the Saddam regime was dismantled, with an aim to undermine the US coalition efforts in Iraq. Syria has been a key player in the region troubled with conflicts, sectarian divisions, weak economic growth, and the issue of Israeli security. Its refusal to tow the line of democratic reforms and its continued support for terrorism had made it an obstacle in America's neo-con dominated foreign policy in the Middle East which aimed to transform the region with democratisation. The US intended to "clean-up" West Asia, with the last of the remaining Soviet influenced regimes in Iraq, Syria and Iran.[35] As a state designated as one that sponsors terrorism, Syria has long been subject to a series of economic sanctions and diplomatic embargoes. The attack of 9/11 provided a "good opportunity" for Bashar to improve relations with the US and reduce the pressure of the sanctions. In the initial period, Syria cooperated with US intelligence and security agencies, providing key information on Al Qaeda's hideouts and its leadership, and even earned gratitude from America for its role in the War on Terror. But Bashar's refusal to rein in Hezbollah and other Palestinian groups led Bush to extend the axis of evil to include Syria.[36] "Syria must choose the right side in the war on terror by closing terrorist camps and expelling terrorist organisations," Bush declared. Bashar was aware that Syria could be the next target of the US' regime change policy, as it had long pressed Damascus to drop its one party rule and move towards democratisation. The fall of Saddam in 2003 unleashed violence in Iraq. The dismantling of the Ba'athist governance institutions, including the 400,000-strong Ba'athist military, mired Iraq in the grip of a security chaos. The transition of Iraq from a newly liberated state to a stable one failed as sectarian violence between the minority Shia and majority Sunni tribes led to the emergence of a protracted insurgency. Both groups attacked each other while also trying to get rid of the occupying coalition forces to regain control of their territory and establish their version of law and order. The conflict and violence in Iraq had a spill-over effect in Syria. In fact, the arrival of nearly one million Iraqi refugees, mainly Sunnis, emboldened the regime to support the Iraqi opposition groups involved in the insurgency against the US forces.[37] To unsettle the US plans for Iraq, the Bashar regime developed links with the Sunnis, who included the extremists and ex Ba'athists who were

dealt a massive blow with the capture of Saddam. As the armed insurgency began in Iraq, the Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Ahmed Kaftaro, also a Bashar regime supporter, called on Muslim youths to fight the American invasion.

Syria Sponsored Jihadists and Al Qaeda in Iraq

The US invasion and the insurgency in Iraq saw an influx of foreign fighters and *jihadists* from all around the world to fight the coalition forces. Taking advantage of the geographical proximity provided by the 375-mile-long shared border, Syria coordinated with, and assisted, foreign terrorists going to Iraq. Syria became a major to-go-zone for potential foreign fighters[38] joining Al Qaeda and its affiliates in Iraq. They would fly directly into Damascus airport or come overland through Jordan aboard buses which the Syrian border guards let pass. These fighters would then travel to the Syrian border region of Deir ez Zoir to cross over to Anbar province in west-central Iraq or north of the Euphrates river to reach Mosul in Nineveh province to join the *jihadists* groups. Anbar and Nineveh provinces, across the Syrian border in Iraq, are home to Al Qaeda in Iraq [AQI, the earliest manifestation of the Islamic State of Iraq and later (ISIS) or later IS], the Sunni terror group founded by a Jordanian named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.[39] Syria's military and security authorities turned a blind eye as safe houses to store weapons, ammunition and facilitation networks, helping in the movement of foreign fighters, were set up in both rural and urban areas. Handlers in Syria like Muhammad Majid (also known as Mullah Fuad) coordinated the recruitment and handled the financing of the foreign fighters with European cells and training camps in northern Iraq run by the Al Qaeda affiliated Kurdish Ansar al-Islam. [40] He would then help the volunteers to reach Iraq via the capital city of Damascus, and Aleppo. Al Qaeda fighters' recruitment and finance networks such as Abu Ghadiyah operated with the knowledge of Bashar and Syria's military and intelligence agency. The network helped in providing fake passports for foreign terrorists, weapons, guides, safe houses, and finance to join the terror group.[41] [42] Syria's role was not limited to being an intermediary to the movement of these fighters, but included setting up terrorist training camps, providing weapons and combat training. The foreign fighters trained in these camps were responsible for some of the most violent acts and car bombings in Iraq and against the US troops.[43] The facilitation networks of

foreign fighters in Syria, assistance in funding, recruitment and training to wage insurgency in Iraq spawned the rise of Al Qaeda in the region. For Bashar, "Al Qaeda was not different than the Muslim Brotherhood as a state of mind."[44] Yet, he passively supported the group, as it did not threaten to destabilise Syria's internal security and had directed its resources towards helping the Iraqi resistance to the foreign occupying forces—the enemy of both Assad and Al Qaeda. For allowing the use of its porous borders to shelter terror groups used to launch insurgency in the neighbouring country, its benevolent attitude the towards Islamist terrorists and the protection it offers them, Syria has come to be known as the Pakistan of Iraq.[45]

Chapter 3
Arab Spring Uprising to Sectarian Conflict

Civil Uprising turns into Civil War

When social and political revolutions erupted across the Arab region in March 2011, largely peaceful and non-violent protests swelled up across Syria in the major towns and villages, demanding that Bashar give up power. Despite his attempts to silence the protests, with a massive crackdown and use of censorship, on the one hand, and concessions,[46] on the other, by the end of April, it became clear that the situation was getting out of control, and the regime deployed numerous troops on the ground. As Bashar's security forces stepped up the assault, the ghosts of Hama, years of torture, forced disappearances, detentions, lack of economic opportunities, poverty and repression convinced the Syrians that the time had come to fight the regime's ruthlessness, and not be cowed down. The marginalisation of the Sunnis in Syria has split them. Some set up political parties, demonstrated peacefully and spoke out against the regime, while others joined the armed rebel groups. To fight against the military crackdown, various armed group coalitions, made up of civilians, started organising themselves across Syria. The civil society movements which emerged during the brief spell of the Damascus Spring set up local coordinating committees and revolutionary councils governing small neighbourhoods and protecting the citizens from the Army. The Syrian Army's strength, on the other hand, suffered heavy defections, reducing its ranks to around 110,000 men. Low-to-mid-ranking Sunni conscript soldiers, unwilling to fight and indiscriminately shoot civilians, many of whom were their co-religionists, began deserting in large numbers and formed the Free Syrian Army, headquartered in Turkey's northern region.

Rise of Islamists in the Opposition

As the civil war between the Syrian regime and the rebel forces expanded, many *jihadi* elements within and from the neighbouring Libya, Tunisia, Saudi,

Algeria, Morocco, Pakistan and beyond, began flocking to Syria, reducing the initial democratic uprising into a sectarian conflict by projecting the fight as one between Sunni Muslims and the Shia Alawite regime of Bashar. A large number of these foreign fighters joined the *jihadi* and Salafist organisations and participated in the *jihad*. The call by various Sunni clerics, including the influential Egyptian theologian Yusuf al Qaradawi, urging Sunni Muslims worldwide to come for *jihad* in Syria, helped turn the tide of a civil war into a holy crusade, with sectarian overtures, and influx of foreign fighters, against Bashar and Hezbollah.[47] Syria's role in sponsoring terrorism and the Iraqi insurgency since 2003 had prepared a fertile ground for the networks of Islamist extremists and *jihadi* elements in the country. Its "patronage of terrorist organisations allowed for the development of a logistical infrastructure, including weapon storehouses, channels of communications, and access to funding, with the ability to carry out sustained terror campaigns."[48] Some of these foreign Islamist groups decided to join the opposition and exploit the local revolution for their own objectives: to replace the regime with their version of Islam. They envisioned a new world order, modelled on early Islam, defying the idea of a modern state and the principles of democracy.[49] Groups like Liwaa al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwaa al-Ummah defined their aim to establish an Islamic state based on *Sharia* laws,[50] distancing the opposition from the larger revolution and the plural democratic principles that once defined the Syrian uprising. With the added advantage of knowledge of local terrain, important for tactical operations and planning, gained while building the group's networks that later became sleeper cells, and inside knowledge of the Syrian regime's intelligence apparatus, these foreign Islamist and *jihadist* elements, with high military capabilities, helped in tipping the balance in favour of the opposition while influencing and overpowering the local civilian groups. In less than two years, Syria become the most prominent *jihadist* battlefield in the world, providing both a rallying point and training ground for radical Islamists from other nations.[51] Religion became a binding factor for these varying factions and foreign fighters, largely comprising Sunni Muslims, leading to an increase in the *jihadi* discourse and turning the fight against the regime into a fight for Islam. The influence of the medieval Syrian Sunni scholar Ibn Taimiya, who had termed the Alawites as dangerous, unworthy of trust and, therefore, *apostate*, amongst the local Sunni population, made

the *jihad* against Bashar an attractive cause to fight, increasing the ranks of Sunni fighters amongst the opposition. The overtly sectarian nature of the conflict came into prominence with violent, revenge attacks on non-Muslims, minorities and Shias.[52]

The Role of External Actors: Funding and Arming of Islamists

The armed conflict in Syria got mired in regional and sectarian rivalries as Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia began arming the opposition Sunni rebel groups while Iran and Lebanon supported Bashar's deflated military strength through deployment of the elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Quds forces, Shia volunteers and Hezbollah forces. The regional powers' support for the two warring sides divided them along sectarian lines, allowing Iran and Saudi Arabia to engage in a proxy war and use it to leverage their own sphere of influence and hegemony in the region. Since the fall of Saddam in Iraq, Iran was able to influence the regime change and reverse the Sunni domination, allowing it "the opportunity to create a contiguous sphere of (Shia) influence stretching from Western Afghanistan all the way to the Eastern Mediterranean in Lebanon"[53] at the cost of the Saudis. The conflict in Syria provided an opportunity for the Saudis to hit back at rival Iran which vowed to protect the regime if it came under external military attack[54]—by arming and training the anti-Bashar opposition of Sunni rebels and, thus, undermining Iranian influence in Syria as well as in Lebanon.

Many individuals and citizens of the Gulf countries having tribal kinship and relations with the Syrian Sunnis,[55] became influential in fund-raising through private charities to help their 'brothers' and tribe in the armed uprising. The Salafists in these countries became the backbone of the financial support of the Syrian rebels. Qatar opened a Syrian Arab Republic Embassy representing the faction, while Turkey provided shelter to the defected Syrian Army Generals and members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to facilitate the movement of foreign fighters, extremists and rebels fighting the government forces. The border region of Turkey adjoining Syria provided sanctuary and became a base for the rebel fighters of various factions and coalitions.[56] The three countries also reportedly worked together to supply arms and sophisticated military equipment as well as communications through the border town of Adana and Antakya in Turkey to the rebels, including the factions of Islamists

and *jihadists*, fighting the Syrian government under the broad umbrella of the FSA.[57] The weapons distribution was done by independent commanders in Turkey who had no legitimate system and operated through selective favouritism, therby coming into the hands of hardline Islamists and *jihadists*, not the moderate, secular FSA.[58]

The US which supported and recognised the FSA, initially comprising defected Army men, students, peasants and shop-keepers, for removal of Bashar, remained wary of arming them. The fears emanated from the strong presence of *jihadists* and radical elements, and to avoid a repeat of the Libya fiasco where arms sent to opposition rebels from Qatar, landed with the Islamists.[59] While the moderate faction was left to counter the offensive from the regime's forces with home-made explosives and sling-on-the-shot ammunition, the hardliners, including the Al Qaeda affiliate group Ahrar al Sham and others, benefitted from their Gulf patrons and were in a better position to attract more volunteers, increase their ranks, purchase sophisticated military equipment and communication systems. With the Islamists holding the bulk of the arms and finance, the FSA and other factions in many regions began aligning with the radical religious extremists to conduct joint operations against the regime's forces. The entry of foreign Islamists in Syria, their arming and funding by the Sunni states and actors, and the increasing sectarian violence, resulted in the decline of the civil democratic movement while transforming the opposition movement into a *jihadist* battle.

The Regime's Supporters

Not all parts of Syria are up in arms against the regime. The minorities, including in the stronghold of the regime in the coastal areas of Latakia and Tartous Governorates, the Druze-populated Sweida Governorate, and the Christians spread among the major cities and some rural enclaves, remain strong supporters of the regime. When Assad came to power, he built a coalition of support amongst the minorities by manoeuvring religion to create the fear among them that the Ba'ath Party was the only source to prevent a Sunni majority rule and an Islamist takeover of Syria. He monopolised the regime's hold on the Syrian society through recruitment into the Ba'ath Party, "thus, endowing a minority regime with the support of the majority of the population."[60] Bashar exploited the same narrative from the beginning of the

uprising, calling the unarmed protestors terrorists,[61] fuelling fear amongst the minorities, leading them to flock towards the regime for support and, thus, distancing them from the opposition. The fear of a regime change and apprehensions about their fate post Bashar became a crucial factor for the citizens in the reelection of the President for a third seven-year term in office which was presented as a democratic solution to resolve the conflict. Internationally, Russia and China remained strong allies of the Bashar regime, providing military, economic and political support.[62] The permanent members of the United Nations Security Council came in defence of Bashar by using their veto power to block any resolutions[63] calling for a democratic transition in Syria, or sanctions and intervention, thereby diminishing any prospects of resolving the conflict through a political or military solution. This was particularly evident in the wake of the Ghouta chemical attack in 2013 that killed more than 1,500 civilians,[64] when Bashar was saved from military intervention or strikes by Russia's clever diplomatic manoeuvring. Around 25 to 30 chemical attacks have been reported since then. As the war raged on between the regime and the rebels, the political vacuum, the absence of the state's authority in the areas where the regime had lost control, and the failure of the international community to form a determining strategy created a stalemate in any action on Syria, and provided the radical forces and *jihadist* elements an opportunity to exploit the situation for achieving their Islamist ambitions.

The Kurdish Faction and Autonomy

The Kurds residing around the Turkish border in the cantons of Efrin, Ayn-al-Arab, Ras-al-Ayn and Yarabiya crossing with Iraq also joined the armed revolution against the regime's. Numbering around 2.5 million, the Kurds comprised 10 percent of the population but remained disenfranchised, with a majority stripped of their citizenship. In 2004, following riots in the city of Qamshili, the Kurdish population rose up in anger against the severe brutality of the regime's forces. To protect the minority against the regime and its atrocities, the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) formed an armed defensive force made up of civilian men and women. The YPG or Yekiniyen Parastina Gel fought the government forces in the Kurdish dominated governorates. As the civil war spread to Damascus, Bashar focussed his armed strength on securing the capital, and withdrew forces

from the Kurdish areas in 2013, losing his hold in northern Syria. The Kurdish factions have declared autonomy with independent governance in Ifrin, Ayn-al-Arab (Kobane) and Hassakah (the region is the strategic gateway to Turkey and has crucial road networks forming supply chains for many armed groups, making it an attractive territory to capture) and are leading the fight against the hardliner Sunni groups to prevent them from turning the Kurdish region into an Islamic state.

Fragmented Political Opposition

The fragmented nature of Syria's political opposition is a major reason for the failure of the democratic transition. Even when mass protests and demonstrations were organised, the reformist political movement which emerged in the wake of the Damascus Spring and Damascus Declaration, failed to present itself as a credible alternative to replace Bashar. With much of its leadership in exile, it remained highly fragmented due to internal disagreements and infighting. When the Arab Spring protests erupted, it was already "too weak in terms of numbers, organization and resources to significantly contribute to – not to mention control – anti-regime activity on the ground."[65] The revolution itself remained leaderless, with no coordination with the political groups, resulting in spontaneous local arrangements on the ground and in the streets. As a result, the Syrian political opposition has been divided into dominant blocks of exiled leaders in Istanbul: the Syrian National Council (SNC) [66] and the local movement based in Damascus, the National Coordination Committee (NCC). The two remain divided over the question of foreign support and intervention which would be crucial in determining the post Bashar phase.[67] The SNC is widely regarded as the important opposition and is recognised by the US, France, UK, Turkey and the Gulf countries to participate in the international discussions to find solutions. Bashar refuses to deal with this opposition as it includes mainly exiled leaders. The inability of the opposition groups to unite as a credible legitimate representation has prevented the international community from engaging in negotiations for a political transition. Additionally, the political opposition has remained disconnected with the forces on the ground, and is unable to influence the Islamists and militant groups to control the violence, and prevent the increasing death toll.

Chapter 4
The Rise of ISIS

Jihadist Takeover and Governance

In 2011, as Syria reeled under civil war chaos, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the new leader of ISI, found an opportunity to expand its *jihadist* operations from Iraq and capture territory in north Syria. A small delegation of nine fighters headed by the Nineveh operations chief, Abu Muhammad al-Joulani came to establish the Syria part of the ISI's operations. The Al Qaeda foreign fighters' facilitation network which existed during the Iraq insurgency was used to connect other *jihadi* cells from Hassakah, Idlib, Aleppo and Deir ez Zoir Governorates and form the Jabhat al Nusra Front (JAN). JAN headed by Joulani, became prominent in the array of armed opposition groups with its combination of guerilla warfare and suicide attacks targeting Bashar's armed forces. The group emerged publicly in January 2012 and operated as a part of the larger Syrian opposition group, targeting government facilities and military establishments, and liberating local areas from the presence of Syrian armed forces. Following the military victories, JAN used aid to the citizens such as provision of bread and fuel, to gain popular support in the liberated towns, and gradually began imposing its views of an extremist interpretation of Islamic *Sharia* on the community. Smoking cigarettes and playing music were banned, children as young as ten were forced to follow prayers and wear the *hijab*, and women were assaulted for wearing trousers.[68] These measures made the group unpopular amongst the civilians, who, although they were Muslim believers, did not relate to the radical religious applications in their daily life. However, JAN's sizeable numbers of fighters and significant military victories established it as a major opposition group, even leading the US to designate it as a terrorist organisation on December 11, 2012. Although Joulani still reported to Baghdadi in Iraq, disputes between the two on the operational and ideological fronts resulted in a split, with JAN operating more independently and Baghdadi establishing the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Syrian armed opposition, in addition to the moderate rebels,

Islamists and Kurds, now included JAN and an independent ISIS. In Syria, ISIS began operations in the north and consolidated a base around Raqqa. It adopted a radically stark *jihadi*-Salafi strategy which included applying the harshest *hudud* punishments that set it apart from the other extremist rebel groups.[69] By invoking verses from the Quran and declaring *takfir* (apostacy), ISIS carried out public executions, crucifixions, amputations, and flogging, and refused to participate in the Islamic court mediation efforts as a means of justice. While the local population was terrorised into submission, ISIS got strengthened by the recruitment of foreign fighters with its exploitation of the social media for propaganda. The foreign fighters began coming from all around the region and the Western countries to join its ranks. ISIS' brutal approach and the infighting with JAN eventually led Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri to disown it on February 02, 2014. Both JAN and ISIS retained control over the liberated areas by using religion but the latter's objective remained solely focussed on the goal of establishing an Islamic state while rejecting, and creating enmity with, other armed groups. Baghdadi's ISIS closely follows the ideology of Zarqawi who established Al Qaeda's operations in the Levant region. Zarqawi propagated revolutionary changes in *jihadist* tactics and his ideology married traditional Wahhabi-inspired anti-Shi'ism to the strategic goals of worldwide *jihad*.[70] He aspired to return to the purer form of Islam which included eliminating the Shias and also believed in rejoining parts of Greater Syria (Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq) to attain its original glory of *al sham*. Baghdadi called on his followers to wage a *jihad* and "restore the Islamic state, which does not recognise artificially-delineated borders or any nationality other than Islam."[71] He refused to identify ISIS with the larger goal of the Syrian revolution and reminded the people of the fate of the regime changes in Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, all of which began in the name of larger democratic freedom.[72] The Syrians who had sought to free themselves from the shackles of autocracy were now controlled under extremist religious laws.

The Seizure of Deir ez Zoir and Mosul

With military acumen provided by the ex Ba'athist officials in its leadership and the foreign fighters who, influenced by its *jihadi* ideology, were joining in large numbers, ISIS increased reinforcements and made considerable

gains in Syria. By February 2014, it had gained control of Raqqa and Deir ez Zoir Governorates and key transport routes which allowed it to maintain a direct supply link with its established presence in western and northern Iraq, especially in Anbar province, which has been its stronghold since 2005. Through this supply link, ISIS was able to interlink its operations in Iraq and Syria to transfer experienced foreign fighters and captured Syrian Army equipment to Iraq, including vehicles and anti-tank guided munitions. The seizure of Deir ez Zoir provided unchallenged border access to Iraq which became easy after ISIS took over two critical border crossings, Qaim and Waleed, on the Iraq side. By June, it had captured Mosul, which saw the Iraqi Army abandoning its uniforms, posts and weapons which fell into the militants' hands. The reported heist of 500 billion Iraqi dinars or $ 425 million from the Mosul Bank made ISIS a rich and self-sustainable terror group. It also captured a huge cache of sophisticated military equipment originally provided by the US to Iraq. The financial and military assets have been crucial for ISIS to reinforce its strength and capability to maintain control in the newly acquired territories. The group continued its military advances and swept through eastern Syria and northern Iraq. On June 29, on the first day of *Ramadan*, Baghdadi announced the establishment of a Caliphate in the captured territory of Iraq and Syria. On the same day, it published videos showing fighters destroying the post-Ottoman nation-state borders demarcating Syria and Iraq, enshrined in the Sykes-Picott Agreement. Stretching from al-Bab in eastern Aleppo province in Syria to Suleiman Bek in Iraq's Salahuddin province, an estimated 20,000 non-contiguous square miles is an independent territory called the "Islamic State."

Tribal Ties, Black Economy and the Emergence of Islamic State in Syria

The Deir ez Zoir section of the Syrian border—located at the juncture of the main highway north from Damascus and east from Aleppo—was particularly easy for ISIS to cross because of the links between the tribal Sunni populations on either side of the border. According to Romain Caillet, "In Syria, the Euphrates Valley is inhabited by tribes that were forcibly settled when the borders were only faintly outlined, and these nomadic tribes were straddling territories in Iraq and Syria. They have always felt

closer to the Iraqis than to the Syrians of Damascus or the coast—and that's without even touching upon the religious question."[73] Inhabited by Sunnis and Christians, it is also one of Syria's poorest provinces, despite having important oil and gas production resources like the al-Jafra oilfield, the Conoco plant, and the al-Omar oilfield, providing an extract of 385,000 barrels per day and supplying about 10 percent of Syria's natural gas needs—which do not benefit, however, the locals directly. The Syrian border region is geographically distantly located from Damascus, keeping it out of the Bashar regime's centralised control, making it easier for corruption and illegal business. Many of the Sunni tribal *sheikhs* do not support or trust either the Syrian government or the Syrian Ba'ath Party, and they have grown increasingly disaffected over the past several years due to the government's inability to cushion the tribes from Syria's deteriorating economy.[74] In 2003, the region became a major smuggling hub and key foreign fighter facilitation and logistical centre, benefitting the local population. The flow of foreign fighters and their established network in Syria created a shadow economy of smuggling and illicit activities, which benefitted the local population on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border in terms of money and business opportunities. Safe houses for transit, local travel, food, lodging of fighters and purchase of supplies created jobs for the locals whose support eventually became important to sustain the facilitation movement. Reportedly, individual Syrians earned more than $3,000 in a year through smuggling activities.[75] Al Qaeda in Iraq also established a base amongst the locals in Iraq's Nineveh province by helping the Sunnis economically. Considering that ISIS is not a domestic Syrian opposition group and most of its operations first originated in Iraq and are run by foreigners, it would not have been able to take over 35 per cent of Syrian territory had there not been the local people's support. ISIS fighters do not physically control all of the Syrian territory under the Islamic State; however, it has allegiance from the Sunni *sheikhs* who have pledged their support to the group. Raqqa is the first and only major Syrian city under ISIS control. It is governed under the puritanical brand of Islamic laws where music, arts and entertainment are banned, consumption and use of Western products, including chocolates and cosmetics is forbidden and all citizens must pray five times a day. Christians and Shias have either left or are made to pay *jizya*, while their property and houses are captured by ISIS. ISIS has

meticulously devised a system of governance where corruption is intolerable, with offices for health, education, security and Islamic relief, and post offices and *zakat* offices for tribal relations, and even an `embassy' for the province of Aleppo in the north of the country.

ISIS did not grow out of the Syrian rebellion, neither is it a product of the marginalisation of the Sunnis here. It, however, took advantage of the political vacuum in the conflict to capture territory and establish its control over it, making it submit to fundamentalist Islamic laws. Given the history of Syria, with its multi-religious and ethnic population, who enjoyed relative religious freedom and tolerance, Syria was not conducive for Islamist governance outside the democratic structures. The vast majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims and believers but their goal was not to establish a state for the majority based on the religious *Sharia,* by eliminating the other minorities. The enemy was not even the dominant Alawite minority, but the Assad family and its regime under which they had suffered for decades. Yet, ISIS was able to establish a base and control territory with its savage violence and military strength. The over two million Syrians residing in the Caliphate do so out of fear, and also because for many conservatives and tribal Sunnis, ISIS appeals as an attractive alternative to Bashar's despotic rule. By establishing a state for Sunnis, ISIS has revived the concept of Sunni dominance in the Syria-Iraq border region. "In Iraq.... Sunnis are a minority and at a demographic disadvantage.... but ISIS has merged these territories with Syria to reverse this demographic relationship and have a Sunni state straddling Iraq and Syria."[76] In Syria, while the Sunnis are in a majority, they were repressed since the beginning of Ba'ath Party rule and later under the Alawites. By portraying itself as the liberator of the Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, ISIS offers the Sunni a rare opportunity to be a citizen, a concept widely abused in the throes of sectarian politics, military autocratic rule and kingdoms.[77] As Israel as a state propagates Zionism, and Iran is dominated by the Shias, while Saudi Arabia professes Wahhabism, the Islamic State promises to be a land for Sunni dominance under *Sharia* law. To run a Caliphate in the post modern world is equal to running a government, and will require a continuous source of finance to provide governance services, law and order mechanisms, and a justice delivery system. While the Islamic State's features may appeal to some sections of

Sunni Muslims who wish to adhere to the Islamic code of life and migrate to the land, religious ideology and submission to Islamic laws alone will not ensure ISIS' survival. Its tyrannical leadership, imposing harsh decisions, with no form of democracy, has alienated large sections of the local population, including some sects of Muslims, and the Jews, Christians and minorities who have been subjected to violence, been publicly executed, or spared only to live as second class citizens. The shortage of power, fuel and water and the aggressive behaviour of the foreign fighters have made life extremely difficult for the local people under the Islamic State and close to the replication of the critical security situation that ultimately led to its expulsion from Iraq with the Anbar Awakening. The continuation of ISIS will largely be determined by how its leadership performs in governance, providing stability in the society and support to its citizens. Unless ISIS modifies itself into a moderate force and establishes a state for all, it is doomed for eventual failure.

Conclusion

The fragmentation of Syria, with the northern part carved out as a Caliphate, is a blowback of the regime's repressive policies exacerbating the sectarian identity and its sponsorship of terrorism. The Arab Spring provided a golden opportunity for all three elements, the Brotherhood, the civil society reformers and Bashar's regime to shake-up Syria's stagnated political structure. However, all three failed and the vacuum was filled by the radical Islamists. The US had rightly identified the dangers of Assad's foreign policy and its passive support for terrorism, much before Syria's connection in global terror came to light in the 1970s. As one of the five states designated as sponsoring terror, Syria had for long been in the list of the neo-cons for regime change. However, the regime's manipulation of its secular credentials, projecting itself as the only legitimate state actor to fight the evil of terrorism, secured Assad's seat in power. The US remained apprehensive that removing Assad could plunge the state into the hands of Islamic elements, further increasing the instability in the region, as in Iraq, Libya and Iran, and putting Israeli security to further risk. In hindsight, post 9/11, Syria today resembles the third casualty of the US' war on terror which led to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Al Qaeda terrorists, who

America purported to be in Iraq, were in reality nurtured by the Syrian regime's complicity and allowed to perpetrate their terror designs with impunity in its land. As American military officials had predicted a decade ago, terrorism did come back to haunt its Syrian hosts: the Bashar regime.[78] The earliest uprising has now burgeoned into a battleground for proxy wars between regional and international powers, exploiting the geo-sectarian and ethnic faultlines to widen their own spheres of influence. Given the protracted nature of the war in Syria and tangled geo-sectarian, regional and international entanglement, a military solution does not seem to be in sight. Even if that is achieved, disarming the 1,000 odd armed rebel groups and uniting Syria can be only done politically. Bashar is unlikely to be able to restore his authority throughout the country. Unless Syria is cleansed of the existing authoritarian structure, with inclusive political participation and civil liberties, its future, as well as stability and peace in the region will fail to improve. Transforming Syria with a strong leadership which will engage with the rebel and opposition groups and triumph over ISIS will prevent military intervention and the subsequent foreign occupation, which is likely to set off a dangerous and vicious cycle of attacks, violence, growth of terrorism and insurgency. The international community must learn from the war in Syria that any real transformation, including elimination of ISIS and hundreds of other rebel groups, will be inept as long as the diabolical Bashar and his power structure continue. The revolution in Syria which started in the name of democracy, remains incomplete. The millions who were killed and others who were forced to leave their homes to become refugees, and thousands others who continue to live under the siege of the regime and the rebel groups, deserved, and still do, to live a life of dignity and freedom. ISIS' version of a Caliphate is not the answer to the revolution in Syria. The international community needs to stand by, and support, the Syrians to accomplish the long yearned desire of a transition, now from the hands of the regime and ISIS towards true democracy.

How the ISIS' Caliphate Affects India

Since the establishment of the Caliphate, around 15-20 Indian individuals are estimated to have joined ISIS. Although a non-Islamic country, India has the second largest Muslim population in the world and it is

watchful of the resurgence of a militant religious ideology that is luring its citizens from pluralistic democracy to an extremist life under the Islamic Caliphate in Syria. While a large majority is integrated and adheres to moderate beliefs, there are sections of the community who are aligned with the ISIS ideology propagating a purer form of Islam. A case in point is the Lucknow based cleric Syed Salman Husaini Nadwi who was the only Indian/Asian, amongst 120 Islamic scholars across the world, to send congratulatory letters to ISIS leader Caliph Baghdadi. The Indian youths who have joined the ranks of ISIS as Sunni fighters are also evidence of the fact that Indian Muslims are vulnerable to the propaganda of the militant terror group which has attracted over 30,000 foreign fighters from 100 countries, including India and who are currently involved in combat with the *jihadists* terror groups, making Syria the hotspot of the world *jihadist* battlefield. But, undoubtedly, this has raised challenges for Indian security and intelligence officials who fear the threat that these radicals pose: inspired by weapons training and *jihadist* acts and returning home to commit acts of terrorism. Cases such as the return of an Indian fighter[79] who had trained with the IS and fought for six months with the group and the subsequent detention of another young techie[80] running pro-IS propaganda on social media have made it imperative for India to assess the impending security situation in West Asia and its dire consequences of increased radicalisation on the Muslim youth. Bearing in mind the transnational nature of *jihadist* groups, be it ISIS or Al Qaeda, India has begun to widen its strategic engagement and intelligence assessment beyond its territory. Following the crisis of Indian citizens[81] being taken hostage by ISIS, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, since taking office in 2014, has visited the strategic Gulf region three times, holding talks in Oman, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates on security and economic issues. National Security Adviser Ajit Doval also visited Doha in February to hold talks in Qatar, and India recently enhanced security cooperation,[82] providing help in rescuing the Indian hostages held by ISIS. Turkey, which is considered as a gateway to the conflict zone of Syria, has also assisted India in deporting citizens[83] trying to cross over the border to join the Islamic State. The use of the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) by the National Investigation Agency with the US, Canada and

Australia to gather more information on the activities of returning Indian fighters is another step by the intelligence and security agencies to enable them to counter the threat posed by ISIS' radical ideology.

Regionally, one of the many fallouts of the Syrian War has resulted in ISIS establishing a footprint in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well Al Qaeda announcing formation of its India branch in September 2014. It has appointed Maulana Asim Umar, an old Kashmir hand and an Indian Muslim as its pointsman in the subcontinent. The disputed territorial conflict in Kashmir is vulnerable to the threat posed by both ISIS and Al Qaeda, whose strategy includes capitalising on local conflicts in failed or weak states around the world. At home, the Indian Mujahideen (IM) is the most prominent Islamic terror group that shares the aspirations of establishing an Islamic Caliphate. The group has been held responsible for all the main attacks in major Indian cities since 2008 and now much of its leadership is based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Tayyeba has helped the group in the past with training in Pakistan in the use of sophisticated weaponry and guerilla warfare. With most of the group's leadership based in Pakistan, the IM has currently splintered to form the Ansar ul-Tawhid ul-Hind (headed by an Indian Muslim) which has pledged allegiance to ISIS, and uses its cyber skills for propaganda and recruitment of Indian youth. Although the military capability of these groups to wage a massive terror attack from within the country is impeded by the security and intelligence agencies, India remains vulnerable to the threat of radicalisation, home grown terrorism and lone wolf attacks. It is a pertinent challenge for India to ensure that its 180 million strong community does not fall prey to violent radicalisation that has sucked a large number of non-Islamic majority countries into the throes of the current war in Syria. Despite some claims like that of the Anjuman-e-Haideri, a Delhi based Shia organisation volunteering to send an army of one lakh youths to fight ISIS,[84] there have been no clashes between the Sunni and Shia sects post the rise of ISIS or its Caliphate. While most of the Muslim population is considered to be moderate and integrated, it nevertheless, finds itself discriminated against and remains relegated on the social, political and economic fronts. Chronic anti-Muslim sentiments prevail widely in the country which has resulted in numerous incidents of communal riots. By default, the community is also the first to the suspected for any terror or security incident, leading to the arrest

of Muslim youths, many of whom continue to languish in prisons without convictions. India needs strong policies to take the Muslim community into confidence and address the social bigotry that risks alienating this minority community. The answer to prevent radicalisation of Indian Muslims lies within the community and in the religious discourse. Incorporating moderate religious leaders in counter-radicalisation strategies, and ensuring that voices of liberal Muslim role models are heard loudly can help to silence the violent *jihad* clamour. Deterring radicalisation of Muslims in India is a key to the country's security, stability, democracy and secular character.

Notes

1. Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri speech, Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre, October 16, 2013, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/articleprint.aspx?id=20581
2. "Syria Death Toll Now Exceeds 210,000: Rights Group", February 07, 2015, Reuters, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/07/us-mideast-crisis-toll-idUSKBN0LB0DY20150207
3. "Political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable limits" (Juan J Linz, 1964, p. 225), https://books.google.co.in/books?id=8cYk_ABfMJIC&pg=PA159&lpg=PA159&dq=authoritarian+regimes+definition&source=bl&ots=0lfTWrv6y-&sig=HJ7ZtArZsNY2rf6kKdHO-YYDtKI&hl=en&sa=X&ei=0_aXVNDaMdTmuQTen4HQCQ&ved=0CIgBEOgBMBA#v=onepage&q=authoritarian%20regimes%20definition&f=false
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5. On January 28, 2011 in the northeast Syrian city of Al-Hasakah, a man named Hasan Ali Akleh soaked himself with gasoline and set himself alight in a manner reminiscent of Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi.
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