IS SECTARIANISM A CAUSAL FACTOR?
AN ANALYSIS OF IRAN-IRAQ RELATIONS, THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIC
STATE OF SYRIA AND THE LEVANT, AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

by

Adam J. Abramson

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Abstract

This thesis portfolio seeks to address and identify the role that sectarianism plays between nation-states, non-state actors, and state and non-state actors throughout the Middle East. Expanding on current literature that debates the significance of sectarianism in recent events in the Middle East, this thesis portfolio first analyzed the role of sectarianism in Iran-Iraq relations from 2003 until 2014. In analyzing Iran’s policies towards Iraq in this time frame, I researched Iranian policies towards Iraq’s state sovereignty, resource sharing, and Iran’s political involvement in Iraq. I determined that sectarianism often did not factor into Iran’s policy decisions towards Iraq. Next, I addressed the factors responsible for the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL), particularly the territorial gains made by ISIL in Iraq in the summer of 2014. Many academics maintained that sectarianism propagated by the Iraqi government in the lead up to ISIL’s territorial advances was responsible for Iraq’s significant loss of territory to ISIL. I compared ISIL with its predecessor, al Qaeda (AQ) and determined that sectarianism was merely a circumstantial factor in ISIL’s battlefield successes. I concluded that ISIL’s ideological and strategic differences from AQ, particularly ISIL’s focus on gaining and holding territory were responsible for their military successes, where AQ had previously failed. Finally, I examined the role of sectarianism in the Syrian Civil War through which I sought to determine whether sectarianism is a causal factor fueling the conflict. In order to determine this, I examined the involvement of Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia and determined that each nation’s primary interest in the conflict was based on factors other than sectarianism. Each nation proved to be
compelled to intervene in the conflict for self-serving reasons, primarily based on needs for national security, economic security, and the desire for international diplomatic recognition. All three chapters of this thesis portfolio indicate that sectarianism in the Middle East is often a secondary factor in the role that it plays in international and regional relations as evidenced through the specific case studies.

Thesis Readers:
Mark Stout, Ph.D.
William McCants, Ph.D.
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Introduction

The question of the role of sectarianism throughout the Middle East is the subject of scrutiny and debate amongst scholars and strategic observers. One school of thought will argue that sectarianism is a driving force that compels nations to act and influences policy accordingly. The opposing school of thought disregards the claim that sectarianism is intrinsically influential and, rather, argues that sectarianism is either a tool utilized and manipulated by authorities in position of power, or a permissive condition allowing for other conditions to beget policies and actions. This thesis seeks to address some of these concerns regarding sectarianism by analyzing different phenomena throughout the Middle East region, whereby sectarianism is evidently a present factor, yet its actual significance is indeed the cause of great debate.

This thesis portfolio, consisting of three independent chapters, is connected by the theme of sectarianism’s role in each of these regional phenomena to be discussed. The first chapter explores the status of Iran-Iraq relations following the removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003. Following the removal of Saddam Hussein and his Sunni government, the United States handed governing control over mostly to Iraq’s Shia population. It is also generally accepted that Iran’s current government maintains its legitimacy by adhering to its Islamic Revolutionary roots, which are based in Shia Islam. Therefore, I am determined to explore how the Iraqi shift in governance, from Sunni to Shia, impacted Iran-Iraqi relations. By exploring this question pertaining to such a unique set of circumstances, from the lens of Iran’s policy decisions, I will identify whether sectarianism is a determining factor in Iran’s enactment of policy towards the recently Shia ruled Iraq.
The second chapter addresses the question of sectarianism through the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), specifically, ISIL’s successful advances in Iraq in June, 2014. Most scholars and strategic observers claim that ISIL succeeded to control Iraqi territory due to sectarian policies enacted by Iraq’s government prior to ISIL’s advances. Thus, exploring this phenomenon of such decisive and quick victories against the Iraqi military will shed light into what role sectarianism truly had in ISIL’s successes.

The third chapter analyzes the role of sectarianism in Syria’s embattled and incessant civil war. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s violent response to peaceful protests against his rule in 2011 has led to a bitter and deadly conflict, whereby sectarianism is steeped deeply amongst the Alawite regime and the Sunni dominated opposition. And as is consistent with the two previous topics, academics also suggest that sectarianism is a primary factor in continuing to drive the conflict in Syria. By analyzing this complex conflict through the lens of whether sectarianism exists as a causal factor, I will help to explain whether sectarianism is intrinsically responsible for the fueling of a conflict.

This topic of sectarianism, explored through these three phenomena, is beneficial to the existing literature, which discusses the impact of sectarianism on policies in the Middle East. This is significant because if I can identify other factors that might account for the causality to which academics bestow upon sectarianism, I may more accurately highlight the true causes of these phenomena. This would have an impact on strategic analyses of events as well as diplomatic efforts with nations that may otherwise appear to
be rooted in sectarian beliefs. Additionally, these events are recent and this insight adds to a budding and somewhat nascent literary discourse.

This thesis portfolio will shed light on key determinants, other than religious sectarianism, regarding Iran’s foreign policy towards Iraq. This will demonstrate that Iran operates in self-serving interests even in the face of contradicting its own revolutionary ideals and acting belligerently towards their own Shia neighbors in Iraq. This is significant to note because it furthers the argument that Iran can in fact operate in the international system despite its self-espoused, strict revolutionary ideals. Further, this paper will argue that academic claims of the significance of sectarianism insofar as it being a primary causal factor for the rise of ISIL or the Syrian Civil War are overstated and oversimplified. This portfolio highlights several key factors that explain the rise of ISIL, arguing that the sectarian divisiveness of Iraq’s government was merely a permissive condition. This is noteworthy because it seeks to more accurately address the factors that led to the rise of a newly evolved terrorist movement, which has posed an existential threat to nations in the region. By accurately understanding the key determinants behind ISIL’s rise, rather than merely ascribing sectarianism to the event, counter terrorism and geopolitical analysts will be able to better identify the evolution of future terrorist groups. By beginning with the common thread of sectarianism, this portfolio seeks to more acutely discern these significant events.

The first chapter of this portfolio seeks to address the impact that sectarianism had on Iran-Iraqi relations from 2003 until 2014. I intend to analyze Iranian foreign policy towards Iraq in that time frame because it is the time during which Iraq shifted from a government dominated by Sunni Muslims over to a government dominated by Shiite
Muslims. Additionally, 2014 comprises the time period just up until ISIL’s significant territorial gains throughout northwest Iraq. In order to analyze the impact of sectarianism on Iran-Iraqi relations throughout this time period, this chapter will analyze bilateral concerns pertaining to state sovereignty, ownership of resources, and domestic sovereignty as it pertains to Iraq’s political sphere. By highlighting instances of contention between Iran and Iraq after 2003, the chapter will discern whether similar sectarian governments will result in amicable or hostile bilateral relations.

The second chapter of this portfolio will address which factors are responsible for the rise of ISIL, specifically its series of military victories and territorial gains in Iraq, 2014. This chapter will address the shortcomings in scholarly arguments that denote two key factors as primarily responsible: sectarian policies enacted by a Shia dominated Iraqi government alienating its Sunni populations as well as a vacuum created by the Syrian Civil War on Iraq’s borders. The academic literature pertaining to the rise of ISIL explains that ISIL’s success was directly associated with sectarian policies implemented by then-Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which compelled Sunni groups to support ISIL and therefore laid the foundation for a successful ISIL military advance throughout much of the country. And yet this argument fails to address the organized Sunni resistance against ISIL in the areas that ISIL controls, which begets the notion that sectarianism might not be the primary cause for ISIL’s successful rise in 2014.

As academics debate the role that sectarianism contributed to ISIL’s rise, it is necessary to delve into this gap in academia in order to identify how ISIL was able to destabilize much of Iraq so quickly. The chapter will argue that these two explanations are merely permissive conditions allowing for the possibility of a non-state actor to usurp
governmental control of territory. The chapter will then seek to identify what other factors may have led to ISIL’s successes.

By identifying several other key factors that could explain the rise of ISIL and their success in Iraq in June 2014, I will determine that sectarian policies enacted by the Iraqi government did not primarily lead to the rise of ISIL. Rather, it was one condition that existed in tandem with ISIL’s rise. The chapter will delve into the operational and strategic differences between ISIL and al Qaeda in seeking to explain why ISIL was successful in efforts to which al Qaeda had previously failed. It will also explore external factors, such as ISIL’s ability to garner international supporters and attract significant numbers of foreign fighters, without which, ISIL could not be successful. The chapter will argue that ISIL’s primary focus on gaining and governing territory in Iraq differed from al Qaeda’s strategy to fight a global jihad, and was one key factor in ISIL’s territorial successes. Additionally, through brazen deviation from its al-Qaeda roots, ISIL has become a vanguard movement in the jihadist world. ISIL’s specific strategies are appealing to foreign fighters, who have contributed heavily to ISIL’s territorial conquests in Iraq.

The third chapter of this portfolio will examine sectarianism in the ongoing Syrian Civil War. The current conflict in Syria is rooted deeply in sectarian violence and divisions, which has led to academic literature focusing on sectarianism as a primary factor motivating the conflict. The third chapter will question this assertion by identifying the sectarian elements of the conflict as manufactured for political and military benefits to both sides of the conflict. By furthering sectarian, the opposing sides of the conflict attract swathes of supporters out of their own existential fears.
In order to best address the question of sectarianism as a causal factor in the Syrian conflict, this chapter will examine other potential factors, such as external geopolitical factors stemming from intervention from nations, without which the conflict might not continue so bitterly and destructively. Data will indicate that Iran and Russia have provided significant military assistance to Assad’s government throughout the course of the civil war. The chapter will examine the intentions of Iran and Russia along with their strategic interests in ensuring that Assad’s regime does not fall. It will be clear that Iran’s interests in Syria’s conflict is not based on sectarian notions or their own revolutionary ideals, but it is founded on its own national security concerns. Particularly, through the Syrian government, Iran is able to maintain access to its proxy non-state actor, Hezbollah, in Lebanon. This is critical for Iran’s own national security as it threatens the use of Hezbollah against Israel and other United States allies, should Iran be the subject of military attacks. Additionally, Iran is in need of nations with which it can foster economic ties and Syria afforded Iran that opportunity. Through demands for security, regional influence and maintaining trade it is clear that Iran’s strategic interest in its involvement in the Syrian conflict is beyond sectarianism.

This argument is buttressed by an analysis of Russia’s strategic interests in the Syrian Civil War. Through identifying Russia’s concern with radical Islamism spreading within its own borders in the Northern Caucuses, Russia seeks to help Syria combat its opposition. Furthermore, Russia is motivated by its desire to be recognized as an international diplomatic presence as Vladimir Putin seeks to rebuild Russia’s international power echoing the power of its own former Soviet Union. By identifying Russia’s self-interests in similarity to Iran’s, the chapter will show that sectarianism is not
a primary factor for these interests. Similarly, Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the Syrian Civil War, which many argue is sectarian based, will prove to be motivated by its own perception of national security, primarily based on their need to stem the growing regional axis of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah lest Saudi Arabia becomes more vulnerable and less influential in the region.

All three chapters will investigate the question of sectarianism throughout these particular, unique events. Discerning Iran’s determinants in formulating its foreign policy towards a Shia led Iraq will better explain the role of sectarianism in foreign policy between states. Through understanding the factors that led to the rise of ISIL, rather than merely attributing sectarianism as a cause, strategic analysts will better be able to identify and prepare for emerging violent non-state actors in the future. And in seeking to identify sectarianism in the causal spectrum for the Syrian conflict will help to understand other significant factors, such as the motivations for powerful international players. All the while, the literary discourse on sectarianism in the Middle East will be expounded.
Chapter 1

The Impact of Sectarianism on Iranian-Iraqi Relations from 2003 - 2014

Introduction

As a revolutionary state, the Islamic Republic of Iran maintains its legitimacy as a government by embodying the ideals of the revolution in its policies and actions. Thus, it would be expected for Iran to embrace the newly Shia dominated government in Iraq. However, since the removal of Saddam Hussein from the geopolitical landscape in 2003, Iran has acted in ways that could be regarded as subversive towards the Iraqi Shiite community. Because of this, the true determinants of Iranian foreign policy are under scrutiny by academics and observers. Few academics claim that Iran adheres strictly to its religious ideology, particularly when formulating and enacting its foreign policy. Most observers and academics agree that Iran formulates its foreign policy based on pragmatic determinants and concerns. Therefore, this chapter will look to particularly address what kind of pragmatic considerations Iran employs in its foreign policy and how those considerations weigh against the counter argument of Iranian foreign policy rooted in sectarian beliefs.

To understand how pragmatism is the guiding rubric for Iranian policies, this chapter will look specifically at instances of Iranian-Iraqi relations after the removal of Saddam Hussein from power in 2003. It is important to discern how Iran hones its realist foreign policy towards Iraq given the rather scant amount of discussion on the topic to date. While it is clear that Iran enacts a realist approach to its foreign policy, generally disregarding its religiously mandated roots, there is little academic discussion as to how
this pragmatism is exhibited toward the Republic of Iraq. These points are important to
clarify in order to inform United States foreign policy makers in their renewed efforts to
negotiate with the Islamic Republic of Iran as a means to deescalate growing hostilities in
the Middle East region. If United States policy makers are better informed as to how Iran
formulates and enacts policies towards its neighbor Iraq as a recent case study, it could
help pave progressive paths in future dialogue between the United States and the Islamic
Republic of Iran. In an effort to contribute to this discussion, first, this chapter will cover
a wide reaching literature review regarding Iranian foreign policy and its determinants.
This chapter will then attempt to analyze case studies exploring Iran’s policies towards
Iraq regarding state sovereignty, resource sharing, and involvement in Iraqi domestic
politics. Each case study will shed light into Iran’s foreign policy towards Iraq,
particularly whether or not its policies are hostile to Iraq. While this is not
groundbreaking in the foreign policy debate, it is noteworthy to compile how Iran might
choose to forego behavior beneficial to a similarly sectarian neighbor and to enact a more
self-serving approach, whereby its foreign policy adapts to its evolving needs as a nation.

Literature Review

In assessing the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq in the post-
Saddam era, it is important to delve into what the existing scholarship says about the
factors behind the formulation of Iran's foreign policy. There is a split in academia as to
whether or not Iran's foreign policy is rooted in secularism or if it adheres strictly to its
revolutionary, Islamic beliefs. The argument surrounding a foreign policy stemming from
secularism is widely supported by Iran's shifting areas of focus whereby Iran acted
contrary to its constitutional mandate governing its foreign policy (this will be discussed
in more detail). While substantive, this argument fails to address periods of time, since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, when Iran conducted its foreign policy in ways that reflected the ideology of the movement and its Ayatollah but had detrimental consequences to itself as a nation. In examining a variety of the existing literature on this debate, the voices of scholars and strategic studies analysts will shed light on the determinants of Iran's foreign policy as a prelude to case studies in order to better understand the motivating factors behind Iranian foreign policy.

To begin discerning the arguments posited by academics and strategic observers regarding the determinants of Iran's foreign policy, it is important to approach the school of thought supporting the notion of secularism over religion. This is a strongly supported position indicating that Iran routinely adapts its foreign policy to its current needs, regardless if those policies contradict its foundational, revolutionary beliefs. Ray Takeyh is one academic who purports that, when necessary, Iran adapts to pragmatic approaches in formulating its foreign policy. According to Takeyh, in the post-Soviet re-stabilization of Europe, Iran felt particularly more vulnerable to the threat from the newly hegemonic United States and European powers. Given that Iran was isolated and in need of fostering partnerships with other nations, the former President of Iran, Akbar Rafsanjani began to cement economic and security ties with the Federation of Russia.\(^1\) It is here that Takeyh points to Iran's adaptation in its foreign policy. As Iran was fostering its relationship with the Russian Federation, Russia was conducting military operations against the Chechen Muslim rebels. In fact, according to the Iranian constitution, Iran must “maintain mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent states” in addition to “the defence of

\(^1\) Ray Takeyh, “All the Ayatollah's Men,” *National Interest* 121 (September/October 2012): 57.
the rights of all Muslims” and “non-alignment with respect to the hegemonist superpowers”. Rather than Iran cutting ties with Russia over the arguably indiscriminate killing of the Chechen people, Iran simply declared the crisis to be “an internal Russian matter.” This partnership is a significant deviation from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary ideology, yet, a pragmatic one.

Takeyh furthers this notion that Iran adapted its foreign policy to its ever changing needs in defiance of its own revolutionary foundation by discussing other instances of pragmatism even in the face of contradicting its own legitimacy. Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, Akbar Rafsanji’s successor, believed in furthering a pragmatic approach to Iran's foreign policy by seeking to mend relations with the Gulf nations and, in addition, the Western powers. In doing so, according to Takeyh, “Numerous trade, diplomatic and security agreements were signed between the Islamic Republic and the Gulf sheikhdoms.” It is evident that Iran benefited from momentarily opening itself up to re-engaging the existing international structure. Khatami sought to reduce tensions with Israel by announcing that Iran would support a peace deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians if the Palestinians should agree to one. Further, Iran's President also sought to begin working relations with the United States “through a gradual exchange of scholars, activists, and athletes.” Regardless of the failure of many of these efforts, the efforts themselves are contradictory to an isolated, anti-American, Islamic revolutionary tone.

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2 Islamic Republic of Iran Constitution, 10-Foreign Policy, (http://iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/constitution-10.html).
3 Ibid.
4 Takeyh, 58.
5 Ibid.
Sermin Przeczek also argues that Iran's foreign policy is one of adaptation and presents a contradiction to its religious, revolutionary principles. Przeczek's argument juxtaposes the specific mandate on how to conduct foreign policy in Iran's constitution with events and policies made since the Iranian revolution. According to Przeczek, “Chapter X of Iran's Constitution directly deals with foreign policy, reiterating the elimination of foreign elements which have the potential to obstruct the independence of the country.”6 However, this foundational isolationism is problematic in an ever growing world of globalization. Therefore, Przeczek further argues that Iran needs to move away from isolationism in order to maintain its economic development.7 It is worthy to note that, according to Przeczek, the Islamic ideals behind Iran's revolution are not mutually exclusive from conducting a pragmatic foreign policy. However, it is unrealistic for Iran to adhere its foreign policy to its Islamic ideals because there are so few other nations that share the same principles with which Iran can collaborate.8 In other words, according to Przeczek, if there were other nations to which Iran could turn that are favorable to its own interests, Iran would have done so. Here is where Przeczek's argument aligns with the notion that Iran favors foreign policies rooted in pragmatism and secularism over religion and sectarianism. To quote from Przeczek's article, “President Rouhani is known to be predisposed to pragmatism; and an apt negotiator who is already proven to deliver certain concessions in suspending Iran’s nuclear program...”9 It is evident that after evaluating Iran's ability to act in violation of its isolationist principles, Przeczek anticipates Iran to become more involved in the international arena.

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Przeczek
Kayhan Barzegar argues that Iran's revolutionary and Islamic ideologies are only a small factor influencing their foreign policy; rather, Iran is pragmatic and seeks to achieve strategic aims, particularly, in regards to Iraq. According to Barzegar, “At present, the chief aim of Iran’s policy in post-invasion Iraq is to maintain Iraq’s national unity.”\(^{10}\) It is important to note that this includes Iran's support for the democratic political structure of Iraq and including the Sunni and Kurdish minorities in the Iraqi government. This argument aligns with a similar argument posited by Ray Takeyh in his article, “Iran's New Iraq.” According to Takeyh, “The Iranian clerical hardliners...have emerged as forceful advocates of democratic pluralism in Iraq.”\(^ {11}\) The strategic thinking behind supporting a democratic structure in Iraq is that such a structure would enhance the powers of the Iraqi provinces while simultaneously limiting the power of the federal government; one can deduce that a fragile Iraqi federal government is advantageous to Iran.

Given how Iran's constitution forbids foreign elements from influencing its nation, it is inherently an ideological contradiction for Iran to guide its foreign policy in a way that integrates those foreign entities into its economy and society. But there are some shortcomings with these arguments. Iran's foreign policy is influenced by the swaying opinions of its politicians and this opinion has been proven to change based on whether the reformists or conservatives hold positions of power. Therefore, it would be important for these scholars to include in their arguments the rotating positions (between reformists and conservatives) of power and how leadership also influences whether Iran draws from

\(^{10}\) Kayhan Barzegar, “Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Invasion Iraq,” *Middle East Policy,* (December 2008): 49.

ideology or practicality when formulating foreign policy. Yet, as argued by many academics, due to necessity stemming from Iran's growing globalizing needs, adaptability and secularism must prevail over ideology in the formulation of foreign policy for the Islamic Republic.

On the other side of the argument, there are academics and analysts who believe that Iran's foreign policy is ardently dictated by the ideologies instituted by Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolution of the Islamic Republic. Anoushiravan Ehteshami's analysis after the 2003 removal of Saddam Hussein refers to Iran's foreign policy in a way that stresses ideology over secularism. In the article, Ehteshami states that Iran is reluctant to intervene in Iraqi politics because the Iraqi Shiite community is hyper sensitive to avoid meddling by foreign entities, even if that entity is the Shiite Islamic Republic. This argument takes into account a heavier emphasis on shared religion between the Iranians and the Iraqis and the Iranian efforts to respect and support the Iraqi Shiite community. Furthermore, Ehteshami explicitly claims that Iran defers to ideology over practicality: “More broadly, when it comes to relations with the 'Great Satan,' ideology more than policy tends to define the place of the United States in Iran’s agenda.” As evidenced, Ehteshami purports that ideology is the main determinant behind Iranian foreign policy when dealing with Iraq and the United States.

Theory and Hypothesis

From these arguments, it is clear that the majority of academics agree that the Islamic Republic of Iran conducts its foreign policy based on pragmatic determinants.

13 Ehteshami, 128.
Although, as indicated in the literature review, Iran purports itself to continually espouse its revolutionary ideals, both domestically and internationally, Iran continuously adapts its foreign policy to meet its political, economic and security needs; this adaptation exists regardless of any contradictions it may pose to their revolutionary ideals. Given the scholarly arguments discerned in the literature review, it seems unlikely that Iran can solely construct its foreign policy objectives to align with its isolationist constitution. Therefore, I hypothesize that the Islamic Republic of Iran favors pragmatism over ideology even when it is possible to expand its ideological premises to the nascent, similarly sectarian Shiite Iraqi government.

I will test this hypothesis against Iran's policies towards Iraq since the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003, particularly examining Iran's support or opposition towards Iraq's democratic governmental structure, Iran's policies towards its shared water supply with Iraq, and Iran's economic ties with Iraq. This is an opportune case study because Shia Islam is Iraq's most populous religion and since the fall of Saddam Hussein's Sunni-Ba'athist political party, Shia Muslims have been in control of the Iraqi government. If Iran's policy determinants are rooted in religious sectarianism, one could expect to see attempts at expanding Iran's revolutionary ideals into Iraq's domestic affairs. One could also expect to see significant changes in Iran's engagement with Iraq, particularly the enactment of more favorable policies such as offering economic assistance and working to ensure regional stability.

This chapter is furthered by the notion that based on their Islamic revolution, Iran would be encouraged to favorably collaborate with other nations that share its religious ideals. However, based on the arguments posited in the literature review, I expect to
encounter Iranian policies that are favorable to their own economic and security needs standing contradictory to their own revolutionary beliefs. Therefore, I hypothesize that Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq since the removal of Saddam Hussein will serve to benefit Iran even if it means foregoing its revolutionary beliefs, as it has done in past events, in the face of a nation state along its border that shares in the same sect of Islam.

Methodology

The following case study will examine Iranian policies towards Iraq since 2003 focusing on elements of territorial recognition, handling of strategic resources, and Iranian policies towards Iraq's internal politics. By analyzing these three elements of foreign policy, it will become clearer how Iran's foreign policy is formulated. I expect to discern whether Iran has tested its territorial boundaries with Iraq, as has been done in the past, or if Iran adapted its policies to respect the new Iraqi government's territorial sovereignty. Furthermore, I will discuss certain policies that Iran has enacted regarding strategic resources, particularly, resources that affect the people of Iraq. Finally, I will seek to determine the level at which Iran engages in Iraqi domestic politics and governance. In doing so, these three qualitative studies will further contribute to the discussion as to whether or not Iran truly adheres to its revolutionary ideals when conducting its foreign policy.

Data

Considering the opposing academic arguments of either ideology or pragmatism as main determinants in Iran's foreign policy, Iranian actions regarding Iraq's territorial sovereignty will help to reflect their true determinants. Specifically speaking, an
examination of Iran's actions along the Iraqi border since the removal of Saddam Hussein will help to shed light on the intent of Iran's foreign policy. One major crisis of note regarding Iran's actions along Iraq's border since 2003, occurred in December, 2009. According to Reuters news reporting, on December 17, 2009, Iranian troops crossed into Iraqi territory and took control of the Fakka oil field outside the Iraqi city of Amara. As the article denotes, “Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said 11 Iranian soldiers had taken control of the Fakka oilfield in a remote desert area of Southeastern Iraq, in a 'violation of Iraqi sovereignty'.” It is important to note for the purposes of the case study that Iran denied this incursion, however it has been reported on widely by the media, including both Reuters and the New York Times. On December 20th, the New York Times also reported on this particular incursion and alleged that there have been multiple violations of Iraqi territorial sovereignty leading up to the seizure of the oil field: “Border disputes between the countries, which set off the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, have become more common in recent months as Iraq has moved to sell development rights to fields near the Iranian border, including Fakka.” Thus, as territorial disputes were a factor leading up to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, Iran seemingly continued to push its boundaries with Iraq for the sake of attaining oil and other resources.

Supporting the notion that the Iranian-Iraqi border disputes are currently a severe issue straining Iranian-Iraqi relations, academics have highlighted Iran's deliberate provoking of Iraqi security forces in order to examine Iranian foreign policy. Babak Rahimi's article, “Iran's Declining Influence in Iraq” denotes the deteriorating relations

15 http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/12/18/us-iraq-iran-idUSTRE5BH1Y920091218
between Iran and Iraq as of 2012. Specifically, Rahimi references the aforementioned Iranian incursions into Iraqi territory to support his argument. According to Rahimi, “All in all, the persisting border disputes are a consistent source of tension for both countries.”¹⁷ This reference to disputes between Iran and Iraq lends support to the argument that Iran has continued its tendencies to act with self-serving interests even when dealing with a potentially religiously comparable Iraq. One must not overlook the benefits Iran gains by forcefully seizing lands heavily disputed between themselves and Iraq. By entering Iraqi territory, troops from the Islamic Republic of Iran seek to take advantage of a weakened Iraq. In some ways, it is a rather pragmatic calculation for Iran to seize strategic Iraqi oil fields; a seizure that may very well go unchallenged. However, it is in this vein of disregard for the well-being of Iraq that highlights Iran's deviation from its Islamic revolutionary ideals. If based solely on ideology, Iran would not be expected to militarily provoke its commonly religious Iraqi neighbor. However, as indicated, Iran has contributed to a deterioration in relations with Iraq based on self-serving policies.

Although the territorial dispute regarding the oil fields was diffused, it required high-level diplomatic talks to take place between Iraq and Iran in order to reassess the border and redraw territorial boundaries.¹⁸ Iran's decision to seize the al-Fakka oil field, further speaks to its inability to cooperate with Iraq over an extended period of time. As Jason Strakes points out in his article, “The 'Omnibalancing' Proposition and Baghdad’s Foreign Policy: Reinterpreting Contemporary Iraq-Iran-US Relations,” in 2008, one year

prior to the Iranian incursion into Iraqi territory, Iran and Iraq signed an agreement to revisit their territorial boundaries and work together to deescalate tension stemming from the border concerns: “In February 2008, an agreement was signed between Iranian deputy foreign minister for Arab and African Affairs Mohammad-Reza Baqeri and Iraqi deputy foreign minister for legal affairs Muhammad al-Haaj Hammoud to reconstruct the border demarcation posts along the Shatt-al-Arab/Arvand Rud that were introduced under the 1975 Algiers Accord.”

It is significant to note that less than one year after this agreement was signed between high ranking government officials, Iranian troops were sent to occupy the strategic oil field in Iraq's Maysan province.

Although one particular instance of Iranian military incursion into Iraqi territory in 2009 does not encompass an entire discussion pertaining to pragmatic determinants in Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq, it is noteworthy to discuss the possible actions Iran could have taken to avoid provoking Iraq militarily, yet decided to proceed. As previously mentioned, Iran and Iraq had signed an agreement to work together to come up with a solution to deescalate tension in strategically significant borderland areas. However, ignoring this agreement and proceeding to forcefully seize Iraqi land, Iran highlighted its inability to diplomatically engage with today's post-Saddam Hussein Iraq and fails to collaborate with Iraq as a friendly, ideologically similar nation. This failure propagates the notion that ideology has not been a factor in resolving long standing land disputes between Iran and Iraq.

In addition to provoking the Republic of Iraq with border incursions into Iraqi territory, Iran has taken steps to divert key water supplies away from Iraq and back down

19 Strakes, 107.
into Iranian territory. In Martin Chulov's article, “Iraq: Water, Water Nowhere,” Chulov discusses the serious water shortage Baghdad and other eastern regions of Iraq faced beginning in 2007 and continuing through 2010. According to Chulov, “The flow of the Euphrates that reaches Iraq is down, according to scientific estimates, by 50–70 percent and falling further by the week.”20 In addition, Chulov notes that the Iraqi drought led to a deterioration in municipal hygiene as sewage was less regularly pumped out of major cities.21 Combining the difficulty in maintaining healthy standards of living, Iraqi farmers have also been hampered by the drought that left their crops decimated. Merchants found themselves challenged by the lower water levels that made it nearly impossible for larger vessels to traverse the waterways.22 All of these problems were further exacerbated in Iraq when Iran began to divert their Karun river back into their own country and prevented that much needed flow of water from entering the eastern regions of Iraq. As Chulov denotes, “There is trouble, too, from Iran, whose government earlier this year ordered the diversion back into Iranian territory of a key tributary of the Tigris—the Karun River, which enters Iraq just north of the southern city of Basra.”23 This divergence of the water flow is a further illustration of how Iran's realist foreign policy is enacted regarding the Republic of Iraq.

It is insufficient to only highlight Iran's actions here in the context of realism. Rather, if this instance of Iran purposefully preventing a necessary flow of water to Iraq can be discussed within the context of Iran's influence by Shia Islam and its similarly sectarian neighbor, then the analysis will further allay how Iran calculates religion into its
foreign policy. Chulov further discusses how the Iranians responded after being
contfronted by Iraqi Shia over the divergence of their water supply. Chulov quotes then-
Iraqi foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari, who describes the Iraqi Shia as 'Iran's people:'

"They were told about the effect on the people in the south who are exclusively Shias—
their people,' says Iraq’s foreign minister, Hoshyar Zebari. 'They were very embarrassed
by this and promised to look into it.'

"It is important not to understate the significance
of the common religious identity shared by Iran and Iraq's Shiite populations. Yet, despite
this close similarity and the political empowerment of Iraq's Shia, Iran's policy response
after having prevented the flow of fresh water to their drought ridden Iraqi neighbors was
Iran's promise to “look into it.”

And still Iran's pragmatic policies towards the Republic of Iraq continue to
percolate. According to Chulov, resulting from crippling droughts from 2007-2010, Iraq
became a net food importer, importing hundreds of tons of watermelons from Iran. It is
evident that Iraq found itself in dire straits after the environmental induced drought, and
in a time of need for international support, Iraq found itself subject to the pragmatic
nature of Iran's foreign policy. Although this is an inference based on the cohesion of the
aforementioned literary arguments, it is fair to extrapolate that Iran calculated that it is in
its best interests to prevent necessary flows of fresh water into Iraq. Subsequently, in the
same realist vein, Iran then capitalized on Iraq's need to import fresh foods by filling the
void and exporting hundreds of tons of watermelon to Iraq. Not only does Iran benefit
from infusing more water into its own country, but it benefits by selling food to an
increasingly desperate Iraq.

24 Chulov, 37.
25 Chulov, 40.
This water scarcity crisis is a serious strain on Iranian-Iraqi relations. According to an article published by David Leupold in *Middle East Analysis*, Iraqi officials express extreme degrees of frustration with Iranian policies that seem to violate Iraqi interests. As the article cites, “Criticism was also raised in 2009 on an official level as the then Iraqi water minister, Latif Rashid, complained that no dialogue could be established with Iran on that issue, blaming Tehran for ignoring Iraq’s national interests.” Of course, the issue being discussed by Minister Rashid is the Iranian impediment of the Karun River. Iran does not seem to factor Iraq's interests into its own calculations. This is problematic for a country whose roots for legitimacy are founded in a religious revolution, whereby one would anticipate supportive policies for its neighbor that shares the same sect of their religion. Given Iraq's desperate situation and need for water, Iran does not enact policies that are favorable to their fellow Shia neighbors. Instead, when Iraq needed water from the river the most, Iran impeded the flow.

An interesting aspect of Iranian foreign policy that can be incorporated in this discussion is Iran's policies towards Iraq's domestic political structure. Although cited earlier in this paper, Babak Rahimi's argument that Iranian influence is declining in Iraq, is partially attributed to Iran's policies towards Iraq's domestic politics. As Rahimi notes, Iran's desire to enhance its regional power led Iran to support Kurdish and Sunni political factions within Iraq. As noted from Rahimi's article, “Tehran stepped up its Iraq’s strategy to seek the support of Kurdish, Sunni, and various Shi’a factions to solidify its


27 Rahimi, 29.
interests across Iraq’s ethnic and sectarian landscape.” As evidenced, Iran has shown a willingness to support Sunni political movements within Iraq in contradiction to its own sectarian based Islamist mandate to continue to spread the Islamic revolution as they perceive it to rightly exist. It is important to weigh this in the calculation of how Iran's foreign policy is determined because it suggests that Iran is willing to support foreign political movements that otherwise would represent sectarian division and, such as the conflict existing between Sunni and Shia Muslims, a threat to the Iranian Islamic revolution. However, as has been discussed regarding the quantity of research performed on Iranian policy towards Iraq since 2003, there seems to be a scant amount of discussions about Iranian support for particular Sunni political movements in Iraq. The pragmatic reasoning behind such support, as briefly argued by Rahimi, is that Iran would benefit from a quasi-stable Iraq, and Iran understands the need for a wide array of political movements to succeed in democratic, Iraqi elections. Therefore, the calculations Iran has made to support Sunni Iraqis is realist in nature, as the Iranians felt that they would garner greater influence over the Iraqi federal government; in this calculation, Iran favored pragmatism over sectarianism.

Discussion

Having examined the circumstances of Iranian foreign policy toward the Republic of Iraq, since 2003, it is evident that when considering territorial disputes, strategic waterways, and Iranian external support for diplomatic movements within Iraq, Iran has consistently ignored the opportunity to propagate the notions of its revolutionary ideologies and instead, enacted and employed pragmatic policies towards Iraq. This is a

28 Ibid.
topic that deserves and requires significantly more attention due to several factors. Firstly, with the withdrawal of United States troops, the Republic of Iraq finds itself in need of conducting expanded diplomacy with the Islamic Republic of Iran. As the United States holds key interests in the preservation of the Republic of Iraq, it is important to discern how Iran's policies are formulated towards Iraq. Additionally, as the United States finds itself increasingly closer to diplomatic progress with Iranian officials, it is also important to openly debate the determinants behind Iranian foreign policy as well as discerning what circumstances may beget particular policies enacted by Iran. It is of significant note to summarize the key findings from the three case studies performed in this research paper.

**Conclusion**

In the face of diplomatic agreements and deescalation of tension between Iran and Iraq, Iranian troops unilaterally seized a strategic oil field in the Iraqi province of Maysan in 2009, whereby Iran risked provoking Iraq into a military confrontation. From this incursion, Iran proved to be more preoccupied with potentially benefiting from an oil field rather than its supposedly ideological mandate to enact its policies based on the 1979 revolutionary principles.

As Iran disregarded Iraq's sovereignty by violating its borders, Iran too showed a disregard for the people of Iraq, who were desperately affected by serious droughts beginning in 2007. As discussed, the droughts were so severe that rivers dried up and trade subsequently decreased. Iraqi agriculture began to falter so much that Iraq became a net importer of food by 2010. Instead of working to enact policies that would help to
counteract the Iraqi drought, Iran actively diverted a key river away from its Iraqi destination, and brought it back into its own lands. Regarding the discussion pertaining to the role of sectarianism in Iran’s foreign policy, it is evident that sectarianism does not play a determining role, specifically regarding Iran-Iraq relations. The calculation made by Iran clearly favored the realist school of thought and disregarded, yet again, Iranian Islamic, ideological underpinnings. And finally, Iran's desire to interfere in Iraqi politics to the level of supporting Sunni political movements strictly for the purpose of gaining influence over a weakened federal Iraq works to further encapsulate how Iran enacts its pragmatic approaches to foreign policy enacted towards Iraq.

Although this paper is only a tiny inspection of an infinitely complex and convoluted topic, it is necessary to further examine, in depth, the patterns and determinants of Iranian foreign policy. It is also important to note that several inferences made throughout this paper have been made based on the limited sources available on the specific discussion of Iranian foreign policy towards Iraq since 2003.
Chapter 2

Which Factors Contributed to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’s Military Successes in Northern and Western Iraq in 2014?

Introduction

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) attracted international attention after it achieved a succession of military victories against the Iraqi armed forces in areas of Northern and Western Iraq in June 2014. These victories yielded ISIL significant strategic territories rich with oil and populated by a majority of Sunni Muslims—the same sect of Islam from which ISIL hails. As alarming as the acquisition of these territories are, equally alarming is the relative ease with which ISIL seemingly conquered those territories. ISIL’s sudden regional destabilization prompted many academics to explain how exactly ISIL managed to emerge so successfully, particularly considering that the readily studied al-Qaeda had failed to maintain the kinds of territorial gains achieved by ISIL.

Some analysts posit that ISIL is a jihadist group whose success is due to the political marginalization of Sunnis under the Iraqi federal government. Other academics argue that the lawlessness of vast regions spanning Syria and Iraq, a product of the Syrian civil war against President Bashar al-Assad, has provided the ideal circumstance for a jihadist group to flourish. However, these widely accepted assertions fail to calculate the struggles that al-Qaeda and other militant jihadist groups faced as they attempted to...

achieve military victories in the same region. Therefore, I contest that both of these academic schools of thought overlook a significant aspect of ISIL, that is, the fundamental differences between ISIL and al-Qaeda Central (AQC), which might help to explain the swift success of a group in a region where al-Qaeda struggled to garner the same kind of traction that ISIL achieved. This chapter will research which factors led to the seemingly swift rise and success of ISIL. I will present a literature review that compares the different academic perspectives on what those major contributing factors are and how ISIL grew from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to the group that it is today. I will seek to incorporate an analysis of the differing strategic doctrines and tactics between ISIL and al-Qaeda that might explain, from an internal sense, why ISIL ostensibly emerged so powerfully. I will also discern which external factors may have contributed to the success of ISIL rather than al-Qaeda all to try to better explain ISIL's success where al-Qaeda has failed.

**Literature Review**

As academics have undertaken the effort to explain how ISIL has managed to seize territory once governed by the sovereign nation of Iraq, some posit that the Shia dominated governance of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, from 2006 – 2014, inadvertently compelled Iraqi Sunnis to support ISIL over the National Iraqi government. 30 Snyder claims that Sunni tribes were frustrated with the Iraqi government's imprisonment of thousands of Sunni men who, according to Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar

province, were unjustly imprisoned. Expressing their concerns, Sunni tribes established protest camps in Anbar province; in the winter of 2013, Prime Minister Maliki ordered Iraqi national troops to eradicate these protest camps. In sum, according to Snyder, “The people's distrust of the Iraqi National Government, particularly in Anbar, has set the stage for future politically fueled ethnic conflict.” By marginalizing the Sunni population, Snyder insinuates that Maliki's governance created the political and sectarian atmosphere that forced the Sunni population to support ISIL over the Iraqi National Government.

Supporting Snyder's claim that the Iraqi government was unwilling to adequately incorporate Sunnis into the national political process, Phillips also indicates that this political marginalization is one of three factors responsible for the resurgence of militant jihadism in Iraq after the United States' military departure in 2011. According to Phillips, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki led a “discriminatory and divisive” Iraqi government that was more focused on consolidating Shia dominance than supporting a religiously and politically inclusive government. As Phillips further notes, “This left them open to revived jihadist overtures, as well as ensuring continued sectarian division in Iraq.” Phillips propagates the same notion as Snyder, both claiming that the policies enacted by Maliki were significant in leading to the resurgence of jihadists in Iraq, particularly ISIL's victories over Iraqi government forces in Anbar province and other Sunni dominated regions.

31 Snyder, 12.
32 Ibid.
34 Phillips, 495.
35 Ibid.
Although there is substance to the academic claim that Iraq's government under Maliki pushed Sunnis to embrace ISIL rather than a divisive Shia government, these claims are incomplete as they do not address other academics, who point out that the Sunni population (in the regions conquered by ISIL) has resisted the authority of jihadist militants, particularly ISIL. According to Aymenn al-Tamimi, Sunnis in Mosul formed the group known as 'The Mosul Battalions' to battle against the rule of ISIL.\(^{36}\) Al-Tamimi details at least fourteen separate organized attacks against ISIL perpetrated by Sunni resistance fighters from August 27\(^{th}\), 2014 – September 2\(^{nd}\), 2014. Additionally, the Mosul Battalions released a statement that, according to al-Tamimi, "affirms the need for Mosul to be freed from IS [sic] control" and condemns ISIL's extremist actions.\(^{37}\) Another Sunni group known as “The Movement of the Free Men of Mosul” denies that the Sunni population supports ISIL in the following official statement released on August 31\(^{st}\) 2014:

> After the occupation of Mosul by the IS [sic] organization the majority of our beloved provinces have said that the people of Ninawa are the ones who helped IS [sic] to enter the town but the opposite is true...the IS [sic] guys, days after their entry, began to publish video clips showing the people of Ninawa in their majority supporting them but what actually took place was a gathering of their supporters from the ignorant and cells that were already working with them before their entry.\(^{38}\)


37 Al-Tamimi, 2.

38 Al-Tamimi, 3.
Evidently, Sunni groups in Mosul have also begun to band together, albeit loosely, in their vow to expel ISIL from Iraqi territory. Some Sunni tribal groups have even begun coordinating military operations with the Iraqi government in their bid to oppose ISIL. For instance, the Hamza Battalions, an amalgamation of Sunni tribes, have pledged their support to the Iraqi national army and police forces to counter ISIL.

Al-Tamimi also suggests that residents in Mosul and the greater Anbar province might have initially welcomed ISIL fighters because the residents perceived the Iraqi national army to be conducting incessant checkpoints and engaging with the population in an overbearing manner. However, as the Sunni tribes began resisting ISIL militarily, ISIL has taken similar steps to implement checkpoints and increase inspections of local villagers in Anbar province and outside of Fallujah. With the seemingly widespread Sunni resistance emerging against ISIL, it seems incomplete to assert that the political marginalization of Maliki's government is responsible for the successes of ISIL.

Zana Gulmohamad's article, “The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (Levant) ISIS,” also discredits the notion that due to Maliki's promises to foster a religiously inclusive government were unfulfilled, those Sunni populations (particularly in Anbar province and Mosul) were compelled to support ISIL. In fact, Gulmohamad also refers to the event in which Maliki's government disbanded Sunni protest camps in 2013. Regarding the discontented Sunnis, Gulmohamad asserts, “ISIS [sic] seized this golden opportunity and gained control over a swath of territories in Anbar province, especially

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39 Al-Tamimi, 4.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
its two large cities, Ramadi and Fallujah.\textsuperscript{42} However, Gulmohamad argues that ISIL is losing support of the Sunni populations due to its own brutal attacks on local populations as well as fighting against other Islamist groups, such as al-Qaeda.\textsuperscript{43} Indeed, Gulmohamad's claim dispels the notion that Maliki's political governance pushed the Sunni population into embracing ISIL. Yet, as is prevalent in the available mainstream academic discussion, academics do not completely explain how, in the face of opposition from the Sunni people they purport to fight on behalf of, ISIL continues to hold its territory and has successfully established a quasi-government.

While the politically exclusive government of former Prime Minister Maliki may have lost its ability to govern Sunni majority regions, it does not fully answer the question as to how ISIL was able to succeed in affirming control over those regions, rather than other militant or political groups, such as Iraqi Ba'athists from the former Ba'athist regime or al-Qaeda affiliated groups. As Sunnis were preparing to defend against the oppressive Shia government, observers might claim that these Sunnis, in turn, supported ISIL's surge. However, as demonstrated, many groups in the crisis ridden areas are in fact resisting against ISIL's extremist actions. Therefore, the claim that PM Maliki's Shia dominated government compelled Sunnis to support ISIL only addresses the permissible conditions, that is, the conditions necessary for ISIL's success; this commonly stated position is not sufficient in discerning what it is that has allotted for ISIL's success in the Iraqi territories.

\textsuperscript{43} Gulmohamad, 3.
Another major factor that academics have attributed to the rise of ISIL is the ever disintegrating governing capability of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Although a discussion of the Syrian civil war requires intricate analysis given the multitude of participants on all sides, this chapter will regard the Syrian civil war as it relates to expanded battlefields on the Syrian and Iraqi border amongst and between ISIL and al-Qaeda affiliates. In order to further explain the successful surge of ISIL, Phillips maintains that the Syrian civil war provided Iraqi jihadists with the ideal opportunity to operate outside of the reach of Iraqi Armed Forces (i.e. Raqqa, Syria) while entrenching themselves in areas ungovernable for Syria and Iraq's government.\(^{44}\) According to Phillips, “The war in Syria has given Iraqi jihadists invaluable opportunities to gain battlefield experience and new recruits, while operating in sanctuaries beyond the reach of the al-Maliki government.”\(^{45}\)

Indeed, it is significant to note the political and security context in which ISIL has attained territory and established a self-proclaimed *caliphate*. One cannot ignore the circumstances that spurred such successes and allowed a once nascent movement to achieve unanticipated victories. But there is more that must be discussed, in addition to the permissive conditions, to explain the recent successes of ISIL. As the previous authors and academic journals charted out the political atmospheres that helped to further ISIL's goals, they also failed to incorporate differentiating factors of ISIL's ideology and strategic doctrines into their arguments. As evidenced, some academics argued that former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki pushed Sunni minorities towards embracing

\(^{44}\) Phillips, 496.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.
ISIL. Other academics argued that although Maliki was divisive and hostile towards the Sunni minorities, those same groups have in fact begun resisting against the rule of ISIL.

Additionally, it must be noted that al-Qaeda's militant jihadism was all but eradicated in Iraq during the Sunni awakening by 2008. As Phillips notes, “By early 2008, over 90,000 predominantly Sunni militiamen had been organized into ‘Sons of Iraq’ groups tasked with the responsibility of fighting AQI, leaving the latter both outgunned and ever more estranged from the local population.”\(^\text{46}\) Yet, ISIL has evidently flourished in an unprecedented fashion maintaining governance over large territory and populations previously determined to oust al-Qaeda and its remnants. Therefore, I am compelled to look inward at ISIL itself and to discern the differences between ISIL and al-Qaeda to try to explain ISIL's success where al-Qaeda has failed.

**Theory and Hypothesis**

As previously noted, the consensus among academics and strategic observers denotes that several factors account for ISIL's resurgence and territorial successes in June, 2014. The political exclusion of Iraq's Sunnis throughout Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's governance, from 2006-2014, and sectarian tensions further perpetuated by this political marginalization is one major factor academics assert as an explanation for ISIL's success. Some academics claim that the Sunni population was eager to see the repulsion of Iraq's national government and ISIL was happily received. However, as indicated, some Sunni tribes quickly began resisting ISIL in military conflict, thus, allowing for the argument that other conditions must be considered to explain ISIL's success.

This logic can also be applied to the academics who point to the breakdown of regional governance due to Syria's seemingly endless civil war in which the sovereign nations of Syria and Iraq lost the ability to control parts of their own countries. And yet, while permitting the conditions necessary for a militant group to declare an Islamic State and to overrun territories for the purpose of implementing its own government, the current arguments do not wholly explain why ISIL, a seemingly failed offshoot of al-Qaeda, was able to emerge so successfully.

Therefore, I hypothesize that in addition to the political and regional context that undoubtedly permitted ISIL to emerge, it is indeed ISIL's differences from al-Qaeda that can best explain its victories and entrenchment in the regions that it overtook in Iraq in the summer of 2014. ISIL's internal structure and battlefield tactics helped to attract supporters and thus give rise to its prominence. Al-Qaeda's battlefield tactics and strategic doctrine may have been shaped by its longstanding engagement with United States' troops and thus may have shaped Zawahiri's reluctance to formally declare an Islamic State and to engage on the battlefield with the same kind of tactics that Baghdadi began to employ as he explicitly announced the separation from al-Qaeda. I will argue that this trajectory allowed for ISIL to capitalize on the vacuum created by the aforementioned permissive conditions.

Methodology

An analysis of internal and external factors pertaining to ISIL will seek to explain why the movement was able to become successful in Iraq despite its brutal tactics and resistance from local Sunni populations. Internal factors to be examined are the stated
goals of ISIL to establish an Islamic State, the strategies employed by ISIL in order to achieve such a goal, and how these support or conflict with al-Qaeda's goals as stated by its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. This will be evidenced by the key differences between Zawahiri’s al-Qaeda and Baghdadi’s ISIL in order to explain the operational successes that ISIL achieved whereas al-Qaeda did not.

Significant external factors to consider are the appeal of such a movement in the face of other options, such as al-Qaeda or al-Qaeda affiliated groups like Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), and how that may impact the support garnered by ISIL. In the data section, after establishing that ISIL seized on key opportunities that Zawahiri’s allies opted not to act upon themselves, I expect to see that ISIL attracts a high percentage of foreign fighters to partake in its movement.

Moreover, the data section will be comprised of independent and dependent variables to best organize and convey the argument in question. The independent variables are the internal and external factors of ISIL and al-Qaeda, particularly, their strategic doctrines and ideological foundations as well as how these groups are poised to attain their vision of territorial governance; the dependent variables will be the impact that the independent variables have on ISIL's success in Iraq compared to that of al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda affiliated groups.

**Data**

In order to best assess the reasons behind ISIL’s military success and the ability to maintain governance in the territories it holds, it is first important to trace the formation of the group as it rose from a rogue entity led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi into the
movement it is today. Stemming from Zarqawi’s founding of Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-jihad in 1999, ISIL’s ideologies are steeped in Zarqawi’s beliefs that authority is given to those fighting on the front lines rather than those issuing orders behind the scenes.\footnote{Aaron Zelin, “The War Between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement,” \textit{The Washington Institute for Near East Policy} 20 (June 2014): 1-11.} This was indeed problematic for relations between Zarqawi’s network and Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda, which sought to attain \textit{bayā} (allegiances) from jihadist groups in order to issue directorates to them. Furthermore, Zarqawi’s adherence to his extreme views on \textit{takfīr} sowed more tensions between his budding jihadist movement and al-Qaeda in 1999.\footnote{Zelin, 1.} Implementing these beliefs into his militant network, Zarqawi attracted foreign fighters as his popularity grew amongst militant jihadists due to his infamous militant campaigns against Shia targets and Sunni civilians. Despite the existing tension between al-Qaeda and Zarqawi’s network in Iraq, Bin Laden’s determination to engage in jihad in Iraq led al-Qaeda to provide Zarqawi with funding and logistics to expand his operations. In turn, Zarqawi pledged \textit{bayā} to Bin Laden, guaranteeing loyalty to him and thus publicly declaring the foundation of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), thus implying a shared vision of al-Qaeda’s global jihad.\footnote{Zelin, 2.}

The convergence between al-Qaeda and Zarqawi’s network can often be described as a marriage of convenience and thus, having been built on disjointed visions, was fragile from the outset. Zarqawi’s tactics continued to reflect the extreme \textit{takfīr} philosophy, that is, those who deviate from the Salafi based ideology are deemed non-believers and subject to purging. This drew public criticism from Zawahiri as indicated in two public letters, which urged Zarqawi “to remember that we are in a battle, and that
more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media.”

These public urgings are significant moments in the already fragile alliance between Zawahiri and Zarqawi. It begins to chart the competing visions of Zawahiri and Zarqawi. As Zawahiri indicates, he is concerned with al-Qaeda’s image and perception and believed that the consequences for sustained attacks against fellow Sunni Muslims could lead to backlash that would undermine its global jihadist ambitions.

Furthermore, Zawahiri’s public disagreement with Zarqawi begins to highlight stark differences in strategy between the two jihadist movements. Following the death of Zarqawi in 2006, Zarqawi’s followers announced the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and appointed Abu Omar al-Baghdadi to be its leader. Following the death of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took control of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and furthered the vision of his predecessors Zarqawi and Abu Omar by declaring that the Islamic State extended into Syria, becoming ISIL, and encompassing the al-Qaeda affiliated group, Jabhat al Nusra (JN). JN refuted Baghdadi’s declaration and reiterated its own support to Zawahiri and al-Qaeda. Zawahiri attempted to usurp the power of Baghdadi by directing him to focus only on Iraq’s jihad, which in turn was rebuked by Baghdadi. From this point onward, the group operated truly independently from al-Qaeda.

Indeed, this is a fully accepted historiographical account, but for the terms of this chapter it begins to highlight how ISIL is different from al-Qaeda on two important fronts. Particularly, the important differences between ISIL and al-Qaeda are ISIL's

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50 Zelin, 3.
51 Ibid.
52 Zelin, 4.
stricter philosophy of confronting and purging *takfiri* Muslims (those that deviate from the stricter Salafi principles) as well as Zawahiri's incessant desire to battle the governments backed by the United States and Western powers rather than focusing their efforts on prematurely establishing an Islamic state. The public rift between Zawahiri and Zarqawi begets the notion that Zawahiri not only wanted Zarqawi to be more discriminate in his military tactics, but he wanted Zarqawi to also hold off on declaring an Islamic State. One may deduce that Zawahiri, making decisions from afar and disconnected from the daily occurrences on the ground, may have been overly cautious as he developed al-Qaeda's political strategies. It is in this official split from al-Qaeda that ISIL can be evaluated on the grounds of the internal and external factors that may be attributable to its military success in Iraq, 2014.

Internal factors dictating the strategy and ideology of ISIL paved the way for successfully establishing the Islamic State in Iraq. By focusing on acquiring territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIL had operated in contradiction to Zawahiri’s doctrine of patiently deteriorating the capabilities of the Western powers before embarking on its vision of a global caliphate. Referring to al-Qaeda, Zelin notes, “The group also aimed to topple ‘apostate’ Arab regimes. To achieve these goals, however, it first had to cut off the head of the snake - the United States and the West.”53 This strategy points to the focus of al-Qaeda’s networks to focus on Western targets and relates back to the friction between al-Qaeda and ISIL, whereby ISIL refused to follow the direction of al-Qaeda. Therefore,

53 Zelin, 2.
Baghdadi’s ISIL forged ahead with its own goals and simultaneously directly challenged the authority of al-Qaeda in the realm of global jihad.\(^{54}\)

In fact, according to Richard Barrett, “unlike al-Qaeda, it [ISIL] is more immediately focused on violent revolution in Muslim majority countries than on attacking their Western sponsors.\(^{55}\)” It is in this vein that al-Qaeda seemingly missed out on the opportunity to establish its own dominance over territory in the region by reigning in its own affiliates and directing them to not support the actions of ISIL. For instance, JN pledged its allegiance to Zawahiri and a JN commander, known as Abu Sa’ad al-Hadrami, was concerned that waging war under the banner of ISIL would be perceived as disobedience to Zawahiri. Therefore, Hadrami withdrew his forces from Raqqa and returned shortly after under the distinct banner of JN.\(^{56}\) This is one example of al-Qaeda’s strategic doctrine being a limiting factor with regards to seizing territory and thus can help to explain ISIL’s success.

It is significant to note that Zawahiri’s doctrine indeed shifted to the advocacy of overthrowing particular regimes. Zawahiri found it worthwhile to pursue avenues of territorial control in regions where he believed such a task was attainable, such as Egypt and Syria.\(^{57}\) This strengthens the argument by indicating that Zawahiri adapted al-Qaeda’s strategy to seize territories and overthrow regimes yet has thus far failed to succeed on the level that ISIL has achieved. One can posit that Zawahiri’s patient strategies resulted in too little at too late of a time for al-Qaeda to conquer ground similar

\(^{54}\) Zelin, 3.
to that of ISIL. Additionally, the differing strategies of ISIL and al-Qaeda contributed to their separation and subsequently kept al-Qaeda away from the gains made in Iraq in summer 2014.

It is equally important to analyze the unique external factors that may have contributed to ISIL’s successes. Most notably, academics such as William McCants argue that al-Qaeda has lost its appeal to many jihadists around the world. As McCants notes, “…al Qaeda is no longer the vanguard of the Islamist movement in the Arab world…al Qaeda’s goal of removing those rulers is now being fulfilled by others who are unlikely to share its political vision.”\(^{58}\) Although McCants was originally referencing the potential for Islamist political movements to attain international support through democratic processes, his verbiage still rings true regarding competing jihadist movements, such as ISIL, that has overtaken the sensationalist aspect of waging jihad, thus begetting large swathes of international supporters. As McCants perceived al-Qaeda as losing its appeal back in 2011, Zelin refers to a press release by ISIL’s spokesman, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, who expressed: “Verily al-Qaeda today has ceased to be the base of jihad, rather its leadership has become an axe supporting the destruction of the project of the Islamic State and the coming *khilafa* (caliphate).”\(^{59}\) Although the sentiments expressed by the spokesman of ISIL are incredibly biased, the facts indicate immense support for ISIL from foreign fighters as well as international jihadist movements. Tamimi’s assertions further support these claims: “…most foreign jihadis fighting in Syria have declared their allegiance to ISIL.”\(^{60}\) By attracting so many foreign fighters,
ISIL is able to maintain a large support base in the areas in which it is entrenched, despite the opposition it encounters from local Sunni populations as earlier discussed. It is estimated that roughly 15,000 foreign fighters (more than half of whom come from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan and Turkey) are fighting under the auspices of ISIL and, according to some researchers, ISIL could not continue on such a boisterous path without the support from these fighters. Additionally, other researchers suggest that up to 80 percent of foreign fighters in Syria have joined ISIL.

As the data suggests, ISIL enjoys a great deal of support from foreign fighters and has managed to overtake al-Qaeda and its affiliate JN as they compete for foreign fighters in the region. This is significant because, as noted, ISIL would not be as militarily capable if not for the sustained support of its foreign fighters. One can deduce that the split from al-Qaeda permitted ISIL to implement its own strategies that subsequently helped in achieving that vanguard status in the Islamic jihadi movement attracting support from foreign militant jihadists and local Islamists.

In addition to support from foreign Islamist militants, ISIL was able to garner support from ex-Baathist military officials, who calculated that supporting ISIL would best serve their own interests to overthrow the Iraqi Shia national government. A New York Times article depicts coordinated attacks between former Baathist members and members of ISIL, such as tactical attacks on prisons, which were carried out by former

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61 Barrett, 16.
62 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,” Middle East Review of International Affairs 17 (Fall 2013): 19-44.
63 NPR, Saddam’s Ex-Officer: We’ve Played Key Role in Helping Militants, http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/06/19/323691052/saddams-ex-officer-weve-played-key-role-in-helping-militants (June 19, 2014)
intelligence officers and ex-Republican guard soldiers.\textsuperscript{64} Although peer reviewed academic research is scarce with regards to ex-Baathist elements comprising ISIL, it is still worthwhile to note the cooperation that has taken place as it further highlights areas of success afforded to ISIL as it seized territory in Iraq.

**Discussion**

This research attempted to begin bridging the gap in current academic literature by identifying and explaining which factors led to ISIL's military success in attaining territory in Northern and Western Iraq stemming from their June, 2014 advance. Academic journals and strategic observers did not completely delve into the question as to why ISIL was able to be so successful in the face of similarly failed attempts by al-Qaeda affiliated groups and other militant groups seeking to capitalize on the chaos created by Iraq's systematic political marginalization of the Sunni population. By highlighting the differences between al-Qaeda and ISIL through internal and external factors, I attempted to explain the phenomenon of militant jihadism's unprecedented success in the face of organized opposition from local Sunni tribes.

The discussion throughout this paper also lends itself to the greater context of the evolution of al-Qaeda affiliated groups and the ramifications of their allegiances to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri. As previously noted, Zawahiri's desire to operate patiently may have led to over strategizing, which seemingly might have allotted a window of opportunity for ISIL to expand its influence and enact its own vision of territorial governance and implementation of the Islamic State as Baghdadi envisioned.

Moving forward, analysts of political Islam and terrorism should consider the potential for novel and appealing movements to increase in popularity at an unexpectedly fast rate. Given the attraction that ISIL was able to purvey as it drew in foreign fighters, future jihadist movements might try to replicate similar internal factors that enabled ISIL to succeed such as adopting a doctrine that challenges the status quo of global jihad, whatever that may be at the time. It may also be insightful to study the governance style and strategies of ISIL in the future in order to further assess the entrenchment of the group and how its vision for a caliphate is actually being implemented.

Conclusion

Having encountered the unanswered question as to how ISIL was able to overtake al-Qaeda in becoming the prominent jihadist movement in Iraq, I set out to begin the discussion by discerning what factors attributed to the military successes of ISIL in Iraq, 2014. I observed a gap in the existing literature that addressed these causes in an incomplete manner by merely glossing over permissive conditions that allowed a militant group to emerge successfully without more deeply exploring the question. It was not enough to imply that political marginalization led to ISIL’s success, because this did not address the possibility of al-Qaeda affiliated groups or Ba’athist elements seizing the territories themselves. Likewise, the regional destabilization from Syria’s civil war did not adequately explain why ISIL was able to emerge so powerfully.

In order to establish what factors led to the success of ISIL, I compared certain internal and external factors as it relates to al-Qaeda, particularly under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri. Through analyzing Zawahiri’s continual reluctance to establish an
Islamic State and his focus on attacking Western targets, it is evident that Zawahiri’s direction kept al-Qaeda and its supporters out of the movement to declare an Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The research indicated that, internally, a combination of Zawahiri’s strategic follies and al-Qaeda’s ideological underpinnings prevented al-Qaeda from attaining the regional success that ISIL began to enjoy. The external factors pointed to al-Qaeda’s universal lack of appeal, whereas ISIL attracted overwhelming numbers of foreign fighters, which were critical in their offensive to seize territory in Iraq. As foreign fighters supported the violent and brutal tactics of ISIL, the political considerations from ex-Baathist officials caused them to also lend their support to ISIL. These factors, combined, helped to bridge the gap to better explain what factors led to ISIL’s ability to seize and forcibly govern territory in Northern and Western Iraq in 2014.
Chapter 3

Sectarianism as a Causal Factor in Syria’s Civil War

Introduction

Beginning December, 2010, Arab nations in the Middle East began experiencing protests on a massive scale calling for democracy and the removal of authoritarian leaders. Nations including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria all experienced public demonstrations resulting in an emergent geopolitical landscape, whereby the power of authoritarian figures was either replaced or significantly threatened by populist, democratic movements; this event is commonly referred to as the *Arab Spring*. As abruptly as these protests began, the governments of these nations either ceded their authority, or further entrenched themselves and fought bitterly to retain power and control. The government of the Syrian Arab Republic, referred herein as *Syria*, responded to such anti-government protests with militaristic force almost immediately. According to Diehl, “The first confrontations came between crowds of unarmed protestors, often chanting ‘peaceful, peaceful,’ and security forces that invariably responded with gunfire.” It is critical to note that some of the first protests in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad’s government were conducted by Sunnis in the Syrian town of Daraa and the violent, immediate response against Sunni protestors were carried out at the behest of Syrian government officials, who themselves were members of the

68 Diehl, pg.8.
Alawite sect of Islam. While the intricacies of the Arab Spring warrant a litany of in-depth research and analysis unto itself, for the purposes of this chapter, this immediate use of violence from Syrian government forces in response to protests underscores the significance of sectarianism in the Syrian Civil War that was soon to emerge.

By March, 2015, more than four years after protests against President Assad’s rule began, the Syrian conflict has claimed the lives of more than 220,000 people, caused an economic loss of more than $200 billion USD, and internally displaced more than 50% of the entire Syrian population. The conflict in Syria has attracted international attention as reports of mass casualties and gross human rights violations began to surface, all the while, the integrity of territorial borders separating Syria and Iraq began to disintegrate. As this devastating conflict continued to worsen, the complex demographic composition of the Syrian population became increasingly prevalent. With a prewar population of 22 million people, 12% of the population is Alawi, the Shia Islamist sect of which Bashar al-Assad himself belongs; 64% of the population is comprised of Sunni Arabs; 9% identify as Christians; 10% are ethnically Kurdish but practitioners of Sunni Islam and various religious minorities make up the remainder of the population. These demographic figures are significant because they indicate differing population groups within Syria, namely the Alawite and Sunni populations, which begets the notion that sectarianism itself is a major factor in the ongoing conflict. In fact, recent data sets and analyses indicate that, since the post-Cold War era, violence is not likely to occur among

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69 Diehl, pg. 7.
nations with different cultural and religious identities. Rather, violence is more likely to occur among nations with similar cultures and religions, namely within Islamic nations.\(^{73}\)

For the purposes of this chapter, religious sectarianism, herein referred to as *sectarianism*, will refer to the difference between the religious subsects of Islam, specifically the Alawite (Shia) and Sunni sects, which make up the majority of the participants of the Syrian conflict. When accounting for the ongoing war in Syria, the sectarian divides within the population, and the argument that conflict within nations of similar cultures is more likely than dissimilar cultures, it is evident that sectarianism is a significant factor of the Syrian war. However, as will be discussed further in this chapter, the extent to which sectarianism plays a role in the Syrian conflict is the subject of debate amongst academics. Thus, this chapter will seek to better identify where sectarianism exists in the causal relationship for the continuation of the conflict in Syria.

**Literature Review**

In order to best determine how sectarianism factors into the ongoing Syrian Civil War, it is important to first discuss academic positions on whether religion lends itself as a primary factor that fuels conflicts. Most notably, Samuel Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations?” emphasized the importance that religion has in fuelling conflicts between civilizations. Huntington argues that religion is the most important differentiator between civilizations. Huntington further claims that while religious differences between

civilizations do not guarantee conflict, those differences create an alienating atmosphere between the differing religious groups.\footnote{Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” \textit{Foreign Affairs} (Summer 1993): 22-49.}

Huntington’s position on the role of religion in conflict can be related to the question of sectarianism in the Syrian civil war with respect to the Syrian government’s differentiating treatment amongst its population, based on their religion, leading up to the protests of 2011. For example, prior to 2011, only religious minorities, such as Alawites and Christians, were permitted to worship their religions freely whereas Sunni Muslims could not select their own Imams nor were they permitted to participate in government or form their own political parties.\footnote{M. Zuhdi Jasser, “Sectarian Conflict in Syria,” \textit{Syria Supplemental} (January 2015): 59-67.} The different treatment of the majority Sunni population, when juxtaposed against the minority Shia and Christian populations, reflects Huntington’s assertion that governments “will increasingly attempt to mobilize support by appealing to common religion and civilization identity.”\footnote{Huntington, 29.} In fact, according to Huntington, “Differences in culture and religion create differences over policy issues, ranging from human rights to immigration to trade and commerce to the environment.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Huntington’s argument is further applicable to the Syrian conflict insofar as the opposing sides of the conflict can represent the opposing civilizations to which Huntington refers.

Huntington’s school of thought and his predecessors would claim that conflict within Syria is inevitable given the differences in religion and the opposing nature created through divisive policies. Although Huntington’s assertions regarding religion in conflict can be applied to the Syrian conflict, Huntington fails to take into account several factors that would help to narrowly determine the causal role of sectarianism in conflict.
Most glaringly, Huntington’s argument rests on the assumption that identity is inflexible and that differences in religion are intrinsically the cause for conflict between nations. Huntington overemphasizes the role of religion without factoring in the political role that might beget manipulation of sects of populations. That is, while arguing that differences in religion is the primary cause of conflict, Huntington fails to consider religion as a tool for achieving political means throughout a conflict. Additionally, it is feasible to posit that external factors, such as geopolitical strategic interests can be the driving cause for violent conflict, rather than religious or sectarian differences.

While Huntington’s theory omits a significant element regarding potential political manipulation of religions, it is evident that sectarianism does factor into the Syrian conflict to some capacity. Furthermore, a litany of academics reinforce Huntington’s argument pertaining to the significance of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict. For example, Phillips notes, “Sectarian based murder, sexual violence, kidnappings, ethnic cleansing and inflammatory language have all occurred.” Jasser also denotes instances of violent sectarian rhetoric with slogans such as “the Christians to Beirut and the Alawites to the Grave.” Evidently, sectarianism in Syria has propagated divisive and violent behavior between Alawite and Sunni Syrians. According to the Syrian National Council, a formal opposition council to Bashar al-Assad’s government, “…all these massacres [by the Syrian and armed forces] are ethnic and sectarian cleansing against people in Homs; they’re terrorizing people there in an attempt to make

78 Phillips, 358.
79 Jasser, 62.
them flee the city.”Regarding the role of sectarianism in conflict, in a similar vein of Huntington’s *fait accompli*, Sisk further argues that an ‘ethnic security dilemma’ occurs when embattled elites resort to catalyzing sectarian strife in order to maintain power. While these arguments purport that sectarianism is a critical element of the Syrian conflict and are evidenced by instances of violence cast in a sectarian light, they would be buttressed by analyses of whether factors other than sectarianism could be primarily driving the conflict in Syria.

Further reinforcing the notion that sectarianism is a primary factor of the Syrian conflict, Totten argues, “Assad is doing everything he can to turn the revolution into a sectarian war between Sunnis and Alawites.” Totten’s claim echoes Sisk’s assertion that a sectarian security dilemma has unfolded, whereby both sides of the conflict are inherently compelled to remain loyal to their own sect given the existential dangers that have befallen them. This too reinforces Huntington’s argument pertaining to the opposing sides of a conflict that are mobilized under the auspices of religion. Perhaps Diehl argues most resolutely, “In the end, the sectarian battle - with its potential for unending, pitiless carnage - may drive all the rest.”

And yet, claims of sectarianism as a *primary* driver of the Syrian conflict are met with staunch skepticism from some academics, who believe that the arguments indicating the importance of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict are overstated. Phillips denotes it is false to assume that “…sectarian ties are cohesive and accepted across the group rather

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81 Sisk, 9.
83 Diehl, 9.
than ambiguous and fluid.” Further supporting this skepticism, Hashemi also downplays the role of sectarianism in the conflict spurred by the Arab Spring: “...the fundamental political chasm in the Middle East that shapes internal politics is not between pro-Western and anti-Western forces nor is it between Shia and Sunni or Arab and Jew, but rather it is the enormous gulf that separates longstanding authoritarian regimes from the people they rule over.” While speaking about the Arab Spring as a whole, Hashemi also included the Syrian conflict in his argument and seemingly discarded the notion that sectarianism is a driving force of the conflict in Syria.

Although I group Hashemi’s and Phillips’ arguments together, each downplaying the significance of sectarianism in conflict, Phillips acknowledges that the case of the Syrian Civil War renders itself to being a semi-sectarian conflict, whereby, according to Phillips, “Sectarianism is a factor in the war but certainly not the only one and it varies in importance over space and time.” While Sisk, Diehl and Totten argue that religion and sectarianism is a critical component of the Syrian conflict, Phillips and Hashemi downplay the role of sectarianism as an intrinsic factor, and instead, stress the significance of the manipulation of sects on both sides for political and militaristic benefits. While the majority of the academic literature supports the notion that sectarianism is indeed a significant element fueling the Syrian Civil War, it is unclear where sectarianism falls in the causal spectrum of the conflict; that is, is sectarianism, a key contributing factor of the conflict, or are there other factors that drive the conflict of which sectarianism is merely a byproduct? Thus, neither of these academic schools of

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84 Phillips, 358.
85 Hashemi, 31.
86 Phillips, 358.
thought seek to address, specifically, how sectarianism might factor into the conflict in relation to other factors. This gap in the academic literature begets me to further explore how sectarianism factors into the Syrian civil war.

**Theory and Hypothesis**

As discussed in this chapter’s literature review, it is evident that sectarianism is, at the very least, a present factor in the Syrian Civil War. However, given the lack of exploration into other potential factors, most significantly, external geopolitical factors, it is unclear where sectarianism falls in the causal spectrum of the conflict in Syria. Some aforementioned academics seem to argue that sectarianism is the primary cause of this conflict. While this claim is substantive, it would be strengthened by analyzing other factors which may or may not explain the continued fueling of the conflict. Thus, my question to discern is whether sectarianism in and of itself is the primary cause of the continued conflict of the Syrian Civil War, or can the driving factor be attributed to external geopolitical interests?

I hypothesize that as I delve through the data, I will discover a litany of geopolitical factors that can primarily explain the continuous state of the Syrian Civil War. I anticipate that I will discover that sectarianism is merely a secondary factor, reactive to political manipulation through both the Assad regime and his opponents. Additionally, I expect that the geopolitical interests will steadfastly remain linked to the pragmatic necessities of upholding national security and maintaining regional influence. This analysis will provide further insight into this literary discussion about the role of sectarianism, particularly in the ongoing Syrian conflict.
Methodology

The methodology employed herein will first analyze instances of sectarianism throughout the Syrian conflict impacting both sides of the Syrian Civil War to determine the level of manipulation and the benefits to such use. Then, this chapter will examine the geopolitical interests of nations such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to determine their level of interest in the conflict. The question of the role of sectarianism in conflict will be further strengthened by analyzing these foreign interests in the Syrian conflict and can help to answer whether external factors may be primarily responsible for the continued conflict.

It is significant to first analyze the instances of sectarianism because it will both explain the actual benefits for each side of the conflict. Additionally, it can be contrasted against the results of exploring the geopolitical factors, therefore helping to determine which might be a more significant cause of the conflict. The three nations to be discussed are chosen because each is significantly involved in the conflict. Iran is a staunch ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and shares the sectarian similarities of Shia and Alawite Islam; this similarity will further help to speak to the question investigated in this chapter. Russia, though not an Islamic country, has proven to also be a strong supporter of the Syrian regime under Assad. Providing material weapons and strong support in international diplomacy, Russia’s interests in supporting Syria’s Assad in the country’s civil war will be a fruitful study to help explain interests that are completely non-sectarian. Finally, Saudi Arabia’s interests in the civil war may appear to be sectarian in nature as well, as Wahhabi Islam is the foundation of the Saudi Kingdom. However, it will be interesting to determine whether other factors might explain Saudi Arabia’s
interest in the conflict and therefore might help to further explain where sectarianism falls in the causal spectrum.

**Data**

In order to best evaluate the causality of factors fueling the Syrian Civil War, I will first demonstrate the strategic use of sectarianism by opposing sides of the conflict. This will set a baseline against which other factors might be evaluated in order to determine whether external geopolitical factors could feasibly be attributable to the prolonging of the conflict. Through targeted and deliberate attacks on Sunni populations, scholars and strategic observers claim that the Assad regime has worked to firstly categorize the sides of the conflict and then to entrench each side (Alawite against Sunni) in order for Assad’s government to retain large bases of support amongst the Alawite people and other religious minorities. For example, according to the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), on May 25th, 2012, when 108 Sunni Muslim civilians were killed in opposition controlled villages north of the city of Homs, most victims were summarily executed and some victims were found with pro-Shi’a slogans carved into their foreheads.\(^87\) Sectarianism on Assad’s behest is further evidenced with his creation of Shia militias including ‘The People’s Army’ and less organized ‘Pro-Assad Armed Gangs’\(^88\).

The Assad regime has worked to foster the narrative that the rebel and jihadist oppositions are a threat to the very existence of the Alawite population in Syria. Yet through enflaming sectarian strife within Syria, Assad, in turn, has undoubtedly

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\(^87\) Jasser, 62.  
\(^88\) Ibid.
compelled the Sunni population to perceive this conflict as a fight for their own survival as well. According to Jasser, “Regime abuses have led Sunnis to view the conflict not as Assad’s ruthless attempts to stay in power but an Alawite-led attack against them.”

Inevitably, with the perception that this war has become a fight for survival between two sects of Islam, Sunnis began targeting holy Alawite sites with kidnappings and suicide bombings. This sectarian fighting inevitably attracted Sunni Islamist extremist groups Jubhat al-Nusra (JAN) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). While one can claim that these groups were, in fact, empowered by Assad’s deliberate sectarian strategy, it is known that groups like JAN are in fact sponsored by nations such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In fact, academics and strategic observers have acknowledged external factors contributing to the conflict in Syria insofar as sectarianism is involved. However, they fail to more deeply explore whether the strategic interests of such nations, beyond sectarianism, can cause their participation in the conflict and thus prolonging it.

It is evident that sectarianism is a political tool utilized by both sides of the conflict to further entrench themselves and to solidify control over the separate (Sunni and Alawite) populations. However, while sectarianism is significant, there are other factors to also consider given the fact that sectarianism is a political and military tool. This argument will now be further buttressed by an exploration of potential external geopolitical factors stemming from Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia to help explain the primary factor of this conflict.

89 Jasser, 63.
90 Ibid.
91 Phillips, 370.
Iran is one of the most powerful supporters of Bashar al-Assad’s government, providing much needed military assistance with the deployment of senior commanders of Iran’s elite Quds force as well as military supplies with offensive capabilities.\textsuperscript{92}

Furthermore, according to global risk consultant, Torbjorn Soltvedt, “The involvement of Iranian Revolutionary Guard personnel and Shiite militias such as Hezbollah remains crucial to the Syrian regime’s war effort.”\textsuperscript{93} However, as it is widely known that Iran is so embroiled in its involvement in the Syrian Conflict, Iran maintains an official position that it is not using its military to support Assad’s government. An official statement from an Iranian foreign ministry official reads, “We always have said that we support our Syrian brothers and respect their will…Iran has never got involved in Syria by providing arms or financially or by sending troops.”\textsuperscript{94} It is noteworthy to discover that Iran had steadfastly denied its participation in supporting Assad’s government in the face of so much literature arguing that external forces are mostly motivated by the sectarian nature of the conflict. Given the fact that it is widely known that sectarianism can be used for political benefit, as had been evidenced by Bashar al-Assad’s actions domestically, it would stand to be that Iran would utilize its participation for similar benefits along sectarian lines. That is, if Iran was truly motivated to support Assad’s regime on the grounds of sectarian beliefs, I believe Iran would admit so in order to further galvanize Shia populations in the Middle East for regional support and influence. Therefore, there may be other factors, more significant than sectarianism, fueling Iran’s support of Assad’s regime and its assistance in prolonging the Syrian Civil War.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
Additionally, economic ties between Iran and Syria, prior to the eruption of the conflict in 2011, have been noteworthy. Iran and Syria have agreed to bilateral trade deals in sectors including car manufacturing, construction facilities, telecommunications, agriculture, and oil refineries totaling $3 billion USD in investments from Iran into Syria. It is evident that in addition to seeking an expansion of regional geopolitical influence, Iran may also be working to limit the losses on its previous investments as well as maintaining a rare ally with which it can actively trade and foster economic ties.

Another possible explanation for Iran’s support of Bashar al-Assad and his Alawite dominated government points to Iran’s geopolitical calculations that Syria, governed by Assad, is critical for Iran’s security on a regional and international scale. According to Ayoob, “Syria is Iran’s trump card in the Arab world; it acts as a conduit to Hezbollah, augmenting Tehran’s potential for retaliation against Israeli and American targets for attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities, should such attacks take place.” It stands to reason that Iran perceives its accessibility to Hezbollah, through Syria, as leverage against the United States and its allies, which could cause the United States and the international community to reconsider any possible military offensives in Iran; this is a pragmatic assessment devoid of sectarian influence. Iran, it seems, is most concerned with its own national security and therefore, provides material assistance to the government of Syria in order to maintain access to the group Hezbollah in Lebanon. Additionally, one analyst claims that Iran does not necessarily care to support Assad specifically, but Iran simply does not want to lose its influence in Syria if Assad’s

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government falls. This analysis, coupled with Iran’s distancing from the sectarian rhetoric in its involvement, further illustrates Iran’s strategic assessment of its involvement in the Syrian Civil War to which sectarianism is not a primary factor.

Moving onto discerning the interests of Russia in the Syrian Civil War, it is first important to note that there is no significant argument that Russia’s involvement is motivated by sectarianism. However, this proves to be a worthwhile case study because by identifying Russia’s concerns and strategic interests, from a country that is not motivated by sectarianism, I can enhance my argument with regards to Iran’s strategic concerns.

On September 14th, 2013, Russia intervened in the Syrian conflict when Russia brokered a deal to prevent the United States from striking Syria in retaliation for continued use of chemical weapons against civilian populations. Furthermore, on May 22nd, 2014, Russia vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution that would have empowered the International Criminal Court to investigate human rights abuses taking place in the Syrian conflict. Additionally, on three separate instances, Russia had vetoed sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime through the United Nations Security Council. Crosston argues that Russia is not concerned with maintaining the survival of the Assad

97 The Guardian, Bashar al-Assad’s Syria offers Iran a Springboard into the Arab Middle East, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/08/assad-syria-iran-middle-east (Feb 8, 2012).
100 Ayoob, 85.
regime, but rather, Russia seeks to maintain a global diplomatic presence and to “ensure its place as a legitimate international influence peddler.”

These instances of Russia benefitting from international diplomatic stature by providing diplomatic protection for the Assad regime also underscore a strategic significance that supporting Syria affords to Russia. Ayoob argues, “The fact that Russia’s sole military base outside the countries that formed the former Soviet Union is located in Tartus, Syria, should not be underestimated, especially since its psychological value to Moscow is greater than its strategic worth.” It is important to note Russia’s value for a military presence in Syria, even if only to achieve a status of international significance, as it further underscores Russia’s intentions to support the Assad regime over the opposition, thus continuing to prolong the conflict.

However, Russia’s close ties to the Syrian Alawite regime prior to the conflict cannot be ignored. Russia and Syria have enjoyed close diplomatic ties stemming back to the Soviet Union, signing a bilateral treaty of friendship and cooperation in October, 1980. It is estimated that by 2006 nearly 10,000 Syrian officers received training in both Soviet and Russian military academies and that nearly 2,000 Russian military advisers were actively serving in the Syrian military. Allison argues that many elites in the Russian military and political spheres regard Syria as a longstanding ally and, given the close ties throughout the past few decades, believe it is Russia’s duty to assist an ally in such a conflict.

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101 Crosston, 95.
102 Ayoob, 86.
104 Allison, 802.
It is also significant to note that Russia views maintaining the existence of the Syrian regime as the best way to maintain stability in the country, in which stability is a strategic interest of Russia. This is a similar vein to what was discovered earlier regarding Iran’s interests in supporting the Assad regime, which is support for stability and efforts to build and retain influence regardless of Syria’s government. Russia has proven to not be an ‘absolute’ ally of the Assad regime through its scaled back military shipments at the behest of the United States and Israel. Specifically, Russia cancelled agreements to sell to Syria MiG-31 advanced fighter jets as well as man-portable air defense systems. Though providing critical military supplies to Assad’s regime, Russia’s cooperation to limit the technology provided at the behest of the United States and Israel echoes the strategic calculation that Russia truly has for supporting the Assad regime, which is the fear of a state collapse and the further rise of Islamist jihadists in Syria. Russia has been vocal and clear in its depiction of the conflict in Syria being related to Russia’s struggles with Chechen terrorists and its desire to contain the spread of radical Islam. However, it must also be noted that many Chechens have joined the ranks of forces opposed against Bashar al-Assad. Thus, in an attempt to stem the tide of experienced terrorists in Russia’s Northern Caucuses, Russia has calculated that it is strategically important to support the Assad regime, which Russia ostensibly perceives as being an ally against Sunni extremism.

Whether compelled by a desire for international diplomatic significance or strategic calculations pertaining to national security and regional alliances, Russia has demonstrated a significant influence over the Syrian civil war from non-sectarian

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105 Allison, 806.
106 Allison, 810.
motives. By bringing together these factors in conjunction with the aforementioned Iranian perspective, it has become clearer that sectarianism may not necessarily be the primary driving factor behind the continuation of the Syrian conflict. This claim will be further strengthened by analyzing Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the Syrian Civil War and whether factors other than sectarianism seem to be key motivators.

Saudi Arabia is an ideal final nation to study because it would stand to reason that if sectarianism was the main factor fueling the Syrian conflict, then Saudi Arabia would support the Sunni opposition groups on the basis of sectarian similarities. In fact, Saudi Arabia did not begin publicly supplying arms to the opposition groups until February, 2013, nearly two years after the start of the conflict. Furthermore, these arms are carefully directed to secular elements within the opposition and are meant to avoid the radical Sunni jihadists, who are otherwise the antitheses to Shiite regional influence. In other words, if sectarianism is the main factor for Saudi Arabia’s involvement, they would not have waited for two years to publicly announce arms shipments to the opposition forces, nor would they so carefully seek to avoid those weapons falling into the hands of radical Sunni Islamists.

It is evident that Saudi Arabia is combative towards a growing influence of Iran, especially in a conflict so visibly divided as the one in Syria. However, there are other strategic concerns that are more primary to Saudi Arabia’s involvement than the sectarian element of the conflict, to which many academics ascribed as being the main factor. Saudi Arabia, similar to Russia’s desire to maintain national security from jihadists in its

Northern Caucuses, fears a spillover of conflict into its country should the so-called ‘Shia-Iran-Syria-Hezbollah’ axis emerge victorious in the conflict.\textsuperscript{108} Saudi Arabia may view the ramifications for this axis to be an issue of national security rather than a struggle between Muslims based on sectarian differences. If this is taken as a motivating factor for Saudi Arabia, it would also weaken the arguments that sectarianism is in itself the fueling factor behind the Syrian conflict.

Discussion

The majority of scholarly research on the topic of the Syrian Civil War has so far pointed to the significance of sectarianism as a major component fueling the conflict. While it was met briefly with skepticism, as discussed in the literature review, other potential factors were not significantly explored; most notably, I determined that the strategic interests of nation-states that are heavily involved in the conflict would be a substantive addition to the current literary discourse. It must be noted that the assistance provided to Bashar al-Assad by Russia and Iran, as well as the assistance provided by Saudi Arabia to opposition forces, has proven to be critical for the sustenance of the regime and the opposition respectively, which even further strengthens the argument that Iran’s, Russia’s and Saudi Arabia’s participation has directly continued to prolong the conflict. And as evidenced throughout this chapter, there are indeed several substantive explanations other than sectarianism for the continued conflict in Syria.

Given the complex nature of Iran’s internal politics and its necessity to ostensibly adhere to religious foundations, it was reasonable for scholars and strategic observers to

\textsuperscript{108} Crosston, 105.
determine that Iran’s involvement in Syria was motivated by sectarianism and their need to engage militarily and diplomatically in a conflict in which a similar sectarian population is embattled. Although one may successfully argue that these geopolitical factors can be attributed to motivations stemming from sectarianism, thus verifying that sectarianism would be the primary factor of the conflict, I argue that the Data section of this chapter evidenced that strategic interests of nations are founded in a realism sense; that is, a nation will deem a conflict as part of its strategic interests, and in doing so is not focused on sectarianism or ideology, but based on a pragmatic sense of preservation of national security. This is evidenced by Iran’s lack of sectarian rhetoric, specifically regarding the Syrian conflict, and Iran’s desire to expand its influence in the region regardless of the political regime in power.

Similarly, Russia’s interests in the Syrian Civil War proved to be an important case study because it evidenced that its interests were similar to those of Iran’s and Saudi Arabia’s insofar as each nation is acting on its own fear of the conflict spilling over, in some way, into their own borders. By identifying that these interests are similar, it stands to reason that sectarianism is not the primary factor fueling the conflict. Rather, factors pertaining to international diplomatic relevance, national security, protecting important trade and economic ties all point to motivating factors for foreign nations participating in the Syrian conflict. By analyzing potential factors such as strategic interests focusing on security, trade ties, and regional influence, it became clear that sectarianism is a secondary element fueling the conflict.

For the United States, it is important to understand and identify what may be the motivating factors behind nation-states’ participation in the Syrian conflict because
without such understanding, it is nearly impossible to achieve a path towards peace. Furthermore, by analyzing the interests of powerful nations such as Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia with regards to the Syrian conflict and understanding that sectarianism is an aspect of their interests that can be usurped by other factors, it is beneficial to the literature regarding the role of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict.

There are areas of this chapter to which I would suggest further analysis and discussion. Firstly, I focused mostly on the political use of sectarianism on behalf of Bashar al-Assad’s regime as well as the areas of international support for his regime. In order to best maintain and further complete the argument made in this chapter, I suggest a detailed analysis of the role of sectarianism on behalf of the opposition to Assad’s regime. I also would recommend analysis related to the geopolitical level, whereby Turkey’s role is closely examined. Turkey has been influential in this conflict, however I did not deem it necessary to include in my case study given that it would be too convoluted of a case study given the convoluted nature of their participation.

**Conclusion**

The conflict in Syria, currently in its fourth year, has been the focus of much scholarly literature and strategic observation for, not the least of which, being a horrific civil war as a result of the protests stemming from the Arab Spring. As international attention was drawn to war crimes, damage totaling hundreds of billions of dollars, and the loss of life totaling more than 230,000 people, many observers began to question the main factors contributing to the sustenance of such a bitter and drawn out conflict. Given the sectarian nature in which this conflict existed from the outset, many scholars believed
that sectarianism in itself was to blame for fueling the violence. Indeed, sectarianism was a factor, as was evidenced by the political use of tactics such as targeted attacks on Sunni populations at the behest of the Alawite Assad regime. Many argued that, furthermore, the alienation of the Sunni populations caused both Sunnis and Alawites to perceive the conflict as a fight for survival. However, this assertion was made without factoring in other possible explanations for what could continue to fuel the conflict in Syria.

Seeking to contribute to this literary discussion, I decided to analyze the use of sectarianism for political purposes and the benefits that Assad’s regime, as well as the opposition, attained in deliberately using sectarianism as a militaristic and political tactic. It was not surprising to find that both sides manipulated the demographic landscape of Syria to entrench themselves amongst populations based on sectarian lines. However, simply by stating that sectarianism was a tool for political manipulation, does not adequately address what else might be a factor in the Syrian conflict. Rather, it served to buttress the notion that sectarianism is not an intrinsic cause for the Syrian conflict, rather a byproduct of political manipulation.

The analysis of international meddling into the conflict from Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia pointed to strategic interests devoid of sectarian impetuses and highlighted each nation’s specific, pragmatic, strategic interests through the conflict. The participation of those nations in proved critical in the sustenance of both sides of the Syrian conflict. Though sectarianism is clearly a present factor, it is secondary in the causal spectrum to external geopolitical factors. Therefore, through this chapter, I have concluded that the claims of sectarianism are overstated as a fueling component of the Syrian Civil War.
Conclusion

The topic of sectarianism in the Middle East will be the focus of much continued debate in scholarly literature and amongst strategic observers. Some will continue to posit that sectarianism is a driving factor causing events to unfold such as destabilization of nation-states, the enactment of particular regional policies, and the growing popularity of non-state actors. However, as discussed in this thesis, given the particular scenarios that were evaluated, sectarianism merely existed as a circumstantial factor through which other factors were feasibly primarily responsible for such occurrences.

The first chapter of this thesis discerned that on several instances, Iran behaved belligerently towards its Shia Iraqi neighbor at the detriment to Iraq’s internal policies. Firstly, it was evident that Iran sought to provoke Iraq by invading Iraqi territory along previously disputed areas with Iran’s motivation to capture oil reserves along the Iran-Iraq border. Though the ordeal was defused diplomatically with Iran’s withdrawal of troops, the action pointed to one of a series of steps taken by Iran to establish dominance over a weakened Iraq. Secondly, Iran specifically diverted water flows away from Iraq in time of an Iraqi drought causing agricultural and human suffering on the Iraqi side. Iraqis called upon their sectarian similarities as they suffered through this crisis and Iran essentially dismissed these grievances. Thirdly and perhaps most significantly, was Iran’s support for Sunni domestic political groups in Iraq with the intention to weaken the Iraqi federal government. This support for Sunni groups would stand contrary to the claim that their sectarian ideology would be a motivating factor driving Iran’s foreign policy as they are supporting the different Islamic sect in Iraq.
These instances point to driving factors being self-preservation and disregarding the sectarian similarities that many analysts suggested would have innately drawn Iran and Iraq closer together. These are significant determinations because many scholars have posited that Iran’s influence would grow within Iraq based on similar sectarian identities. However, as evidenced, Iran did not seem to enact amicable policies towards Iraq driven by sectarian sentiments.

There are indeed several areas in this chapter that can be expounded upon and also improved. I would recommend analyzing instances of sectarianism’s influence of policy between Iran and Iraq in the time period before 2003, when Iraq was ruled by Saddam Hussein’s Sunni Ba’ath party. If future research in that area further proves Iran’s ability to discard their sectarian ideology for the sake of its own self-sustenance, it will strengthen my claim that sectarianism is not an influencer of Iran’s policy decisions towards Iraq. Additionally, this chapter examined Iran-Iraq relations from the point of 2003 onward to 2014 without calculating how the presence of United States troops could have impacted these events. Though each event discussed in the first chapter had been bilateral between Iran and Iraq, the existence of United States troops in this time frame should not be overlooked in future analyses. Finally, given the opaque nature of the Iranian regime, there was limited academic scholarship written on this topic, therefore this chapter would have been better served if there were more peer reviewed literature on this topic.

The second chapter of this thesis identified key factors that led to ISIL’s successes other than divisive sectarian policies that alienated Sunni populations in Iraq, as was posited by many scholars and analysts. By performing a comparative analysis of ISIL and
al Qaeda, it became clear that ISIL’s evolution out of al Qaeda in Iraq led it to adapt its strategies and methods, differentiating itself from al Qaeda Central (AQC) and devising strategies specifically designed to attain and secure land for a caliphate. This is in contrast to AQC’s demonstrated reluctance to try to conquer land and establish a caliphate. ISIL taunted and deliberately disobeyed orders from AQC in the time frame leading up to ISIL’s capture of swathes of territory in Iraq, thus attracting vast support from foreign fighters. It was further proven that the attainment of foreign fighters, which comprised a majority of ISIL’s strength on the battlefield, was critical in ISIL’s battlefield successes.

Admittedly, the second chapter was not without its shortcomings. As the analysis focused on the differences between ISIL and AQC with the baseline understanding that AQC failed to achieve similar success to ISIL, it must be noted that AQC failed to usurp Iraqi governmental authority with the presence of United States troops present in Iraq. It is feasible that the omission of United States troops from the analysis is more significant in the second chapter than in the first chapter. However, this does not detract from the argument and analysis that ISIL’s strategic decisions, differing from those of AQC, led to the new found support of tens of thousands of foreign fighters coupled with ISIL’s determination to establish a caliphate. Additionally, my argument might have been strengthened if I further discussed the Sunni awakening, and the lacking effort to galvanize these same Sunni tribes against ISIL leading up to 2014.

Future research and analysis expounding from the second chapter should look to compare ISIL to new and emerging Jihadist movements in the future. Given the argument that was formulated pertaining to the vanguard appeal of ISIL, and subsequently ISIL’s
stunning advances both militarily and organizationally, it would be important to
determine whether new jihadist movements can be identified and mitigated before they
grow in influence.

The third chapter addressed how sectarianism factored into the Syrian Civil War
in the causal spectrum. As was discussed, many academics argued that the Syrian Civil
War was a product of sectarianism and that sectarianism continued to be the primary
cause for its propagation. However, after analyzing data that identified interests in the
Syrian conflict from external entities such as nation states, it became clear that
sectarianism was a byproduct of political manipulation and not in fact a determining
cause for the conflict.

Through analyzing the intentions of Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia, the third
chapter discovered that each nation had pragmatic national security concerns pertaining
to the conflict. Each nation had vested interests in the conflict pertaining to trade, national
security, and the desire to further their own regional and international agendas. Due to
these vested interests, these nations provided much needed material assistance to the
participants of the conflict to ensure their survival. However, as evidenced, sectarianism
was not a determining factor for these nations’ decision to intervene diplomatically and
militarily in the Syrian Civil War.

One of the weak points in the third chapter is that the recent nature of the Syrian
Civil War means that peer reviewed literature on the topic is rather minimal leading to an
argument with potential gaps. However, this opportunity to add to the literary discussion
on sectarianism as a causal factor for the conflict is an important one because it highlighted the intentions of several key international powers involved in the conflict.

By exploring the role of sectarianism in Middle East relations and conflict, policy makers can better understand why certain events are occurring. This will help policy makers to make well informed decisions to mitigate such conflicts and, when possible, to advance United States interests. For example, it is useful for American policy makers to see that Iran has acted in ways hostile to Iraq despite Iraq’s shift to a Shia dominated government. Regardless of the sectarian similarities, Iran has proven to deviate from its own constitutional mandate to have peaceful relations with non-belligerent states in order to best serve its own interests. Furthermore, according to this portfolio, academics have too easily ascribed sectarianism as a primary factor in the rise of ISIL and the prolonging of the Syrian Civil War. Each chapter has consistently proven that the significance of sectarianism on regional events is overstated in academia. Sectarianism is utilized as a political tool, adhered to and ignored as political stakeholders deem fit. Rather, it is important to discern whether other factors might be responsible for such events in order to best bring about stability and implement peace building measures.

Future research building upon this chapter would benefit from delving deeper into several areas. Firstly, Turkey’s role in the conflict can be explored from the same lens that Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia were discussed. It would be important to add to the literary debate to include Turkey, given their significance in the conflict and the religious element of their current political regime. Furthermore, the third chapter explored sectarianism as a tool utilized mostly by Assad’s regime, while only briefly discussing
Sunni jihadist movements’ capitalization on such divisiveness. More detailed analysis should test the claim that sectarianism is a secondary factor in the conflict by analyzing more acutely the intentions of the Sunni opposition and their supporters.

This portfolio sought to address the phenomenon of sectarianism as it consistently appeared in several occurrences throughout the Middle East in the 21st century. Given sectarianism’s constant presence, many academics attributed large events and policy determinants to be caused by sectarian motives. However, by analyzing instances of interstate relations, the rise of non-state extremists, and an internal civil war, it was evident that sectarianism, while evidently a present factor, was secondary often to pragmatic interests of ensuring national security and expanding regional and international influences.
Bibliography


**Curriculum Vita**

Adam J. Abramson was born on July 9, 1990 in Brooklyn, New York. He completed his Bachelor’s degree in Classics with a Linguistics Minor at Binghamton University in 2012. Upon graduation, Adam began work as a Legal Assistant at the international law firm, Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton in New York City. Adam went on to work at the United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation in their Corporate Citizenship Center in Washington, D.C. In August, 2013, Adam began his employment with the House of Representatives as a foreign affairs advisor and Legislative Assistant. Adam’s academic interests consist of studying United States policy pertaining to the Middle East, Russia, and East Asia.