



**SECULAR ARAB NATIONALISM VS ISLAMIC  
EXTREMISM: THE CASES OF IRAQ AND SYRIA IN  
THE POST-COLD WAR ERA**

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## ABSTRACT

### SECULAR ARAB NATIONALISM VS ISLAMIC EXTREMISM: THE CASES OF IRAQ AND SYRIA IN THE POST-COLD WAR

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Political Science and International Relations

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The rise of the Islamic armed groups in the Middle East after the 2000s has become a challenging issue, especially in Iraq and Syria. The American invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring process led to an unprecedented power vacuum that was filled by those groups. These significant turning points could provide opportunities for those groups, however, the problematic role of nationalism in Iraq and Syria which stemmed from the era of Hafez Assad and Saddam Hussein was critical at that point due to the failure of creating an inclusive national identity based on citizenship.

On the other hand, different from the old organizations, the new tactics which were adopted by the Islamic armed groups that rose in Iraq and Syria, caused the increase

of their power. The incorporation of social services on a broader scale and use of strategic violence rather than an all-out-war led to the advance of their mobilization power among their supporters.

This thesis analyses the current rise of Islamic extremism by comparing it with nationalism in the period Hafez, Hussein and subsequent. Findings show that because of the failure of inclusive national politics and new methods of the Islamic armed groups have been caused the rise of extremism.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Islamic Extremism, Iraq, Syria, Middle East



## ÖZET

### LAİK ARAP MİLLİYETÇİLİĞİ VS İSLAMİ AŞIRILIKÇILIK: SOĞUK SAVAŞ DÖNEMİ SONRASINDA IRAK VE SURİYE ÖRNEKLERİ

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İslami silahlı grupların Ortadoğu'da 2000'li yıllardan sonra yükselişi, özellikle Irak ve Suriye'de zorlu bir mesele haline gelmiştir. Amerika'nın 2003'de Irak'ı işgali ve Arap Baharı süreci bu gruplar tarafından doldurulan benzeri görülmemiş bir güç boşluğuna yol açmıştır. Bu önemli dönüm noktaları, bu gruplar için fırsatlar sağlamış olabilir, fakat Hafız Esad ve Saddam Hüseyin döneminden kaynaklanan Irak ve Suriye'de milliyetçiliğin sorunlu rolü, vatandaşlık temelli kapsayıcı bir ulusal kimlik yaratılmadığı için bu noktada kritiktir.

Öte yandan eski gruplardan farklı olarak Irak ve Suriye'de yükselen İslami silahlı gruplar tarafından benimsenen yeni taktikler, bu grupların güçlerinin artmasına katkı

sağlamıştır. Sosyal hizmetlerin daha geniş bir ölçekte kullanılması ve top yekün bir savaş yerine stratejik şiddetin kullanılması, grupların taraftarlarına yönelik seferberlik gücünün artmasına neden olmuştur.

Bu tez güncel İslami aşırılıkçılığı Hafız Esad, Saddam Hüseyin ve devam eden dönemdeki milliyetçilik anlayışıyla karşılaştırarak analiz eder. Bulgular kapsayıcı bir ulusal kimlik yaratmadaki başarısızlığın ve İslami silahlı grupların benimsediği yeni taktiklerin aşırılıkçılığın yükselişe geçmesine neden olduğunu göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Milliyetçilik, İslami Aşırılıcılık, Irak, Suriye, Ortadoğu



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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

GIA: Armed Islamic Group of Algeria

FIS: Islamic Salvation Front

JTWJ: Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad



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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, when World War I ended, under the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916), Britain and France parceled out the Middle East. Britain took Iraq and Transjordan, and France got Syria and Lebanon. However, this situation had not been anticipated by the Arabs. They had hoped for their full independence in return for collaboration in the war against the Ottomans. However, this did not happen, and subsequently, France and Britain started to rule these regions under the mandate rule. The aim was that they would prepare and help these new states which emerged with Sykes-Picot in the process of their independence.

Arab nationalism that arose toward the second period of the 19th century would turn into a collective movement and it emerged as an opposition movement in World War I (Gershoni, 1997). To get independence from the Ottomans, the Arabs allied with France and Britain in the war. Also, there were some who were against the rebellion against the Ottomans and demanded autonomies rather than a war; however, the pro-independence movement succeeded and many Arab states emerged. However, the reality of the political situation differed from their views and hopes. Rather than one unified and fully independent Arab state, there were different Arab states that depended on France and Britain. This environment shaped the path of Arab nationalism. In the beginning it was anti-Ottoman and later it would become anti-western due to the actions that had been taken by France and Britain.

On the other hand, there were no significant examples of Islamist extremist movements from the beginning of the 20th century except for the Ikhwan Organization in Saudi Arabia. Until 1967 Arab nationalism was the only concrete ideology in the Arab world. The extremist movements couldn't find fertile ground to spread their message because of the presence of Arab nationalism. Also, in the new period, after World War I, Islam started to be conceived of as a cultural value that bound Arabs together rather than something which has importance in its rulings or as Hourani puts it "The centre of gravity was shifted from Islam as divine law to Islam as a culture" (Hourani, 1983 p.308).

After the World War II, when the Arab states got their full independence from France and Britain, there were two important events which shaped the way of Arab nationalism. The first was the creation of the Baath party in Syria in 1947 and the second was the Free Officer Coup in Egypt which Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in 1954. Baath and Nasser aimed to unite Arabs under one state and to do this they sometimes became involved in the struggle.

On the other hand, the process that had started with the 1917 Balfour declaration which aimed to settle Jews onto Palestinian soil turned into a war in 1948 between Arabs and Jews. It was important, because in the new period it began to shape the Arab nationalist discourse, which at first, was anti-Ottoman, then anti-western and now it would be anti-Jewish.

The apex of Arab nationalism was the unification of Egypt and Syria in 1958. Under the rule of Nasser, Egypt united with Baathist Syria under the name of the United Arab Republic but it lasted just three years. The increasing Egyptian pressure on Syria was the most important factor in this. After this event, Baath and Nasser would start to clash with each other contentiously to get control of the Arab world.

The event that shattered hopes of Arab nationalism occurred in 1967 when the Arabs were defeated by Israel. After that period, Islamic politics gained momentum in Arab politics. Arab nationalism turned to what was called territorial, state or country nationalism. On the other hand, as put by Chalala “The nationalist cause suffered with the emergence of militant Islamic fundamentalist movements in various Arab countries beginning in the late 1970s” (Chalala,1987).

The rise of Islamic politics showed itself with two important incidents. The first was the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the second was the Afghan war in the same year. The revolution was an example for the Muslim world in terms of indicating that Islamic rule could be in the ascendancy. On the other hand, the Afghan war demonstrated that a common resistance among the members of the Muslim world could be achieved and the seeds of the extremist movements started to spread. For the later period, it can be said that the rise of Islamic politics was shaped in two ways, these were the political Islamists and the radicals. The increased importance of

political Islamic groups in the 1980s and 1990s Muslim countries -the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), Hezbollah and the Welfare Party- and the emerging of the extremist groups - Al-Qaeda and local groups like the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA)- can be seen in this duality. Due to Islamic politics, Arab nationalism lost the importance that had existed before 1967. In the new period, which can be traced to today, Arab politics turned into a more statist or territorial version. Neo-Baathist groups that arose in Syria and Iraq adopted more statist policies even if they claimed that they were loyal to the principles of Baathism and they ruled until the 2000s. On the other hand, the leading figure of Pan-Arabism, Egypt, negotiated with Israel within the Camp David Agreement and turned to consider its own national interest.

The events that occurred after the 2000s constituted an important era for the Middle East. The 9/11 attacks in 2001 in the US led to a worldwide campaign which aimed to wipe out the extremist Islamic movements. Related to that campaign, the invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003 caused the foundations of the phenomenon of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to be laid. In 2011 there was another significant turning point for the region, which was the Arab Spring. The protests, which started in Tunisia caused a stir in the Arab countries against authoritarian rule but in the ongoing process, it evolved in different directions in Syria, Libya, and Egypt. On the other hand, it provided a favorable situation for the Islamic extremist groups to organize and they took the initiative from the hands of revolutionaries one by one and the spring became transformed into winter.

In this thesis, I explain the rise of Islamic extremism after the 2000s by comparing it with nationalism. Chalala (1987) said that “They (Arab Nationalists) would have to explain why religious solidarity had emerged as a stronger force than nationalism in mobilizing people for action.” He highlighted this problem in the 1990s and today it became more visible due to the current struggles. The examples to be considered will be Iraq and Syria because of their circumstances which were mostly affected by the Islamic extremist groups. Even if there was no fertile ground for extremist groups in Syria (except for 1976-1982)<sup>1</sup> and Iraq, in contrast with other Arab countries, these

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<sup>1</sup> For the period of 1976-1982 see the “Ashes of Hama”, Refevre, L. (2013)

movements swiftly took advantage of the situation in these countries. I would argue that this was caused by the regimes that came to power in the 1970s in Syria and Iraq, led by Hafez Assad and Saddam Hussein. Because nationalism was not used as an inclusive ideology that could be embraced by the whole nation, as shown in chapter three, they used it to reinforce their rule (regime survival) and this led to the exclusion of key elements in the country from the political process. More importantly, they couldn't mobilize the public with the aim of supporting a common national interest. The subsequent process that started with the rise of Shias with the invasion of Iraq in 2001 and Bashar Assad's ascendancy in Syria due to the death of Hafez Assad was also important in terms of the same problematic role of nationalism.

In the existing literature, there are various assumptions concerning the rise of Islamic extremism. However, a comparative method toward this issue is very limited and I see that these two phenomenon are interrelated. Therefore I have adopted a comparative method to better understand this phenomenon. I have followed the two-step based comparison. Nationalism has predominantly been accepted as a secular phenomenon. With the works of scholars like Brubaker (2012) and Smith (2000), this assumption was challenged. In the same line, to contradict this assumption, firstly, I compare nationalism and religion to analyze whether they could work together or not. Results show that in the many Muslim countries nationalism and religion are intertwined. However, for my cases, Iraq and Syria, this argument was not valid because of the different experiences that those countries exercised. The suggestion that can be argued is that lack of religious-based nationalism in terms of excluding the religion from the public sphere leads to the rise of Islamic extremism. But my point is that the absence of particular nationalist ideology which stemmed from the essence of the regimes in Iraq and Syria, whether it was religious or secular, paved the way for exercising the instrumental nationalism by those regimes. This situation led to the failure of mobilization power, it is the problem in which I make the second comparison about it. This caused the rising of extremist groups and the regimes lost this power and it passed the Islamic extremist groups because of their efforts which were aimed to fuse social assistance and violence in broader terms.

The period that I intended to look was including the 1970s and subsequent periods for the problematic role of nationalism. With the rise of Islamic politics in the 1970s, the



regimes in Iraq and Syria adopted the various religious policies and discourses in order to struggle with this rising. I would argue that contrary to a particular type of nationalism, there was an instrumental nationalism suffused with tribalism and sectarianism which was differential from period to period. Also, the efforts of ISIS in Syria aren't examined in this thesis because I argue that the organization is Iraqi-based and gets its actual power from Iraq.

I used mostly secondary sources in this thesis that include academic books, articles and internet resources. I tried to look at the prominent works about the question by doing a literature review, however, it can be noted that in the literature there are limited works toward this issue. There are few works that evaluated the trajectory of Arab nationalism, Syrian and, Iraqi nationalism and their relationship with Islamic extremism up until today. Therefore, I tried to examine the related works with my thesis question by using a comparative historical method.

One of the main reasons why this topic has been chosen is that with the current rise of extremist groups people overlook the history of Iraq and Syria. However, this phenomenon is the result of the authoritarian rules that failed to make inclusive national politics. In this point, I would argue that as distinct from the old rulers of Iraq and Syria, the period started with Saddam and Hafez is vital.

In the organization of thesis, in chapter one, there is a brief historical background of Arab nationalism and Islamic Extremism since the start of the 20th century. In this part the aim is offering the readers a general opinion about the issue

In chapter two, there is theoretical framework where I discuss the relationship between nationalism and religion. Here, the purpose is to show that the nationalisms of the many Muslim countries were intertwined with religion. But I would argue that this was not accurate for Syria and Iraq and then I explain my hypothesis.

In chapter three, the body part of the thesis, I try to figure out the question of why nationalism has receded and the Islamic extremism is rising. By comparing nationalism and Islamic extremism based on their mobilization power, I would argue that when the regimes of Iraq and Syria failed to create an inclusive nationalist identity,

they have been surpassed by the extremists. In the last part, possible trajectories of Syrian nationalism, Iraqi nationalism, and Pan-Arab nationalism is discussed.



## **CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ARAB NATIONALISM AND ISLAMIC EXTREMISM**

The rise of nationalism was the main threat to the Empires since the 19th century. One of those was the Ottoman Empire, which because of its multi-ethnic structure would be affected harshly. Firstly, the Balkans were lost as a result of nationalist rebellions and later it would be the turn of the Arab regions, especially the Middle East. However, the situation was complicated among Arabs due to their Islamic identity and this led to the formation of two distinct ideas.

There was one group which defended loyalty to the Ottoman Empire under some conditions, as Antonius states “They should have their own rights as a nationality, such as their own administrative and educational system” (Antonius,1948). On the other hand, there were other Arabs who totally rejected Ottoman rule and proclaimed the need for an independent Arab state. They wished to leave the Ottoman fold and this hope was fueled by Arab nationalism.

After World War I, the Ottoman Empire lost the war and collapsed. Arab rebellions, which were supported by the central powers had an important role in the defeat of the Ottomans in the Middle East. These rebellions can be called the genesis of Arab nationalism (Dawn, 1991). However, in the post-war period, the situation wasn't as hoped for by the Arabs. Sati al-Husri<sup>2</sup>, one of the important ideologues of Arab nationalism, compares the Arab “nation” in the post- World War I period with pre-1871 German lands and domains (Dawisha, 2003). There were different German states or kingdoms until Otto von Bismarck united them and the post-war period reflected a similar situation for the Arabs, as different Arab states came into being rather than one unified state.

In order to understand the issue of the separateness of the Arabs after the post-war period, it would be helpful to analyze the essence of the history of Arabs and Arab nationalism. For example, as Hourani puts it, throughout the centuries the Arabs had

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about the Sati al-Husri see “The Making of an Arab Nationalist: Ottomanism and Arabism in the Life and Thought of Sati Al-Husri”. Cleveland, W.L. (2015)

different communities and cultures (Hourani, 2005) and to see the Arabs as one inextricable part would be wrong. On the other hand, in the context of nationalism, scholars refer to different times and peoples to explain the historical background of Arab nationalism and the form it took;

*“Some would trace it to the teachings of Muhammad Ibn al-Wahhab (1703-91), the originator of the Wahhabi movement ...others to Muhammad Ali (1769-1849) and his son Ibrahim Pasha's attempt ...Several scholars and theorists of Arab nationalism trace its origins to the writings of important thinkers such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), an Egyptian student sent by Muhammad Ali to study in France; the Persian, thinker Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-97); his pupil Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905); Rashid Rida (1865-1935); Abd al- Rahman al-Kawakibi.. (1849-19.02); Negib Azoury (d.1916)...”(Chalala, 1987).*

On the other hand, to look at Ottoman rule before it collapsed is important in order to reach an understanding of the post-war period. In their governance, they divided the Arabs into different provinces and regions for centuries and this policy caused the growing of local identities rather than one collective identity. People had identified themselves by appealing to regional affinities instead of a national identity for decades. As has been argued, throughout the centuries, the Arabs had different experiences and cultures and this background could be the source of the post-war situation.

In the period after WWI new Arab states were created and it was argued that many of them were artificial because of their lack of any kind of historical legacy and due to their borders. As Valbjorn suggests, with the formation of new borders there was “a poor fit between state and society” toward the question of ‘who are we’ and ‘where do we belong’ “ (Valbjorn, 2009). In connection with this issue, developing a common Arab identity was one of the main issues. What were the features of being an Arab at that time?

For the 1920s, Jankowski argues that in this period “... the Arabic language was the chief element in forging the Arab nation” (Jankowski, 1997). Hourani makes similar comments on this issue. “The Arab nation consists of all who speak Arabic as their

mother-tongue, no more, no less” (Hourani, 1983). The importance of the language was one of the primary components of Arab nationalism after the war. At the start, the best way to bind Arabs together was the language which had been spoken for centuries, even if there were different dialects.

On the other hand, Britain and France had cooperated with the Arabs both before and during the WWI. They had promised political independence in return for rebellion against the Ottomans. However, the situation didn't proceed in the manner in which they had guaranteed. They introduced the idea of the mandate and proposed that it would help to prepare these newly created Arab states in terms of their self-governance. In the light of this idea, Britain and France shared Arab territories with the Syces-Picot agreement. Britain took Iraq, Palestine, Transjordan and France created a mandate government in Syria and Lebanon. Hostility eventually arose among the Arabs against the West due to this decision. The era which continued to until WWII was depicted as the “Period of colonial rule by Western powers” (Tibi, 2001).

With the rise of different Arab states, it was argued that because of the “Colonial Powers” it became impossible to create unified Arab states. Their ambitions in the region led to divisions and prevented collective action. In the later period the discourse of Arab nationalism would take form in respect to the dynamics of the period. In the beginning, it was anti-Ottoman, then it would become anti-colonial or anti-Western.

### ***2.1. Efforts to Create a Common Identity***

Developing an ideological basis for Arab nationalism was an important issue in the interwar period. Because local and regional loyalties were more potent, adopting nationalism was problematic (Dawisha, 2003). It was derived from the Ottoman government type which created different provinces in the Arab regions and the cultural differences that existed among the Arabs. After the war, when France and Britain decided to draw up new borders and new Arab states came into existence, this potency would come to the forefront more specifically. As Dawisha puts, after the war, “Regional particularism was another obstacle in the path of Arab nationalism. Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian and other regional identities competed with the larger, all-encompassing Arab identity” (Dawisha, 2003).

On the other hand, according to Owen, the alternative focus for Arab loyalties which was related with colonial rule was another important obstacle for Arab nationalism. He claims that because of the colonial powers which divided the region into separate states, these states started to develop their own, local, laws, symbols and practices (Owen, 1992). His point can be clearly seen in Iraq. Iraq's education system taught the Arabism of Iraq besides the idea of the unity of the Arab nation from the start.

To overcome this issue education was highly significant. King Faisal of Iraq, who ruled Iraq between 1921-1933, was very aware of this issue and he knew the importance of education in creating a nation. Like in any other modern nation-building process, schools were one of the main instruments and in Iraq the education system entered into Christian Syrian Sati al Husri's service who was one of the founders of modern secular Pan-Arabist ideology (Wimmer, 2003).

Iraq was leading the way in this effort and it tried to establish hegemony among the newly created Arab states in the interwar period. However, Iraq had some serious problems within the country which were rooted in demography. Wimmer argues that "Iraq fulfils all conditions for a pervasive and conflictual politicisation of ethnicity" (Wimmer, 2013). Kurds, Shias, and Sunnis would compete with each other in order to make their voices heard in Iraq at that time and today this situation still continues to be a problem in Iraq.

In the interwar period, the political environment was not favorable for Syria, which focused more on the struggle against the French mandate in the country. French and British political attitudes were different at that time. Britain was following a kind of outside policy rather than a direct influence due to its agreement with Iraq in 1930, in which Iraq was recognized as independent but still depended on British assistance. However, it allowed some leeway for Iraq to make independent policies. In Syria, the situation was different, as Kaplan argues "In an effort to forestall a rise in Arab nationalism, the French granted autonomous status to Alawite dominated Latakia and to Jabal Druze... (Kaplan, 2011). France was following a policy which was based on anti-Arab nationalism and they collaborated with the minorities to suppress any kind of idea that would pose a problem for their administration. Heavy repression in the country, especially toward Sunni Arabs, who were the majority, made Syria different

from Iraq's situation. They focused more on the struggle against the French mandate in the country.

## ***2.2. One of The First Examples of Islamic Extremist Groups: The Ikhwan Organization***

The Ikhwan organization in Saudi Arabia, as distinct from the Ikhwan in Egypt, was one of the important examples with regards to Islamic extremist movements in the early 20th century. It was formed by the Saud family as a military-religious force to protect the kingdom and spread their religious ideas, Wahhabism, in the region. (Hegghammer, Lacroix, 2007). Rather than any kind of political struggle, the group adopted more radical understandings of Wahhabism and toward the end of the 1930s it became uncontrollable and rebelled against the Saudis. As Fadl puts that “In many instances, the Ikhwan flogged and even executed pilgrims for performing rituals that violated the Wahhabi understanding of Islamic law. (Fadl, 2010). Finally, the group was disbanded and destroyed by the Saudi king.

## ***2.3. The Path of Arab Nationalism After WW II***

The struggle of Arab nationalism that aimed to create a strong and common ideological ground continued until WW II. In 1945, the Arab League<sup>3</sup> was formed in Cairo with efforts by Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Transjordan, and Yemen. The expectation was that this initiative would bring Arabs closer. But this event which was seen as positive led to important disagreements and failure. According to Barnett;

“One reason why the League of Arab States failed to contain Pan-Arabism is that whereas many Arab leaders demonstrated a general willingness to order their relations along state-centric, territorial lines, transnational and domestic forces continued to demand and expect another role for the Arab state” (Barnett, 1993).

After the Second World War, many Arab states got their full independence from mandate states. When they obtained sovereignty and the so-called the “colonial

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<sup>3</sup> The *Arab League*, formally the League of Arab States, is a regional organization in the Arab world, which today has twenty two members.

period” finished, the discourse which had nourished the Arab nationalism would change once again. In the post-war period the Palestinian issue, which started with Balfour Declaration in 1917<sup>4</sup>, aimed at creating a Jewish state in Palestine with the support of Britain, was surfacing now much more. “In most respects, Arab nationalists only became aware of the importance of the Palestine issue after the 1948 War” (Joffe, 1983). When the war happened between Israel and Palestine, all Arab states stood behind Palestine and the Palestine issue has been thought of as cement for Arab nationalism. A new discourse of Arab nationalism was shaping in an anti-Zionist perspective due to Israel's expansionist policies toward Palestine.

#### ***2.4. The Period of Nasser and Rivalries Between Arab States***

After World War II, there were two significant events that affected the path of Arab nationalism, The Egyptian Free Officers Coup in 1952 and the creation of the Baath Party in 1947 in Syria. In Egypt with the Free Officers Coup which was against the monarchical rule of King Farouk, Nasser came to power in 1956, four years after the coup and his policies influenced the whole region between 1956-1967 and under his rule, Egypt would become the vanguard of Arab nationalism. In the inter-war period, Egypt was in the background for Arab politics and it continued to do so until Nasser's reign.

On the other hand, Egypt had gained experience about state affairs due to Napoleon's invasion and the Muhammad Ali Dynasty which gained some degree of autonomy from the Ottomans. As has been argued, it wasn't like newly emerged Arab states. “It has been a distinct political, economic, and cultural entity for a longer period of time than any other Middle Eastern state” (Goldschmidt, 2004).

Egypt's stagnant situation was starting to change with Nasser. At the start of his governance, Nasser began to adopt more local policies but his policies started to change because of threats coming from the West, such as Suez, and he adopted a discourse which was addressed to the whole Arab world rather than just Egypt. The Suez Crisis was one of the best known examples about this issue. As argued by

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<sup>4</sup> The *Balfour Declaration* was a public statement issued by the British government in 1917 during the First World War announcing support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people.



Jankowski (1997) “The Suez crisis of 1956 moved Arab nationalist aspirations to a new level and led to the more intense efforts to attain meaningful Arab unity that marked the later 1950s”. During the crisis, Nasser was seeking to nationalize the Suez Canal. It had strategic importance in terms of oil imports to Europe and the canal was run by an Anglo-French company. Egypt had been unable to benefit sufficiently from the canal for years and because of the lucrative trade passing through Suez, Nasser looked on enviously.

In the ongoing process, France and Britain allied themselves with Israel and invaded the Sinai Peninsula in response to Nasser’s attempt to nationalize it. However, when the United States and USSR, the two superpowers of that period, objected to any kind of intervention, Israel, France, and Britain had to retreat from Egypt’s territories. Although Egypt lost the battle in the field they won it on the table and Nasser became a hero among Arabs.

Another important event which influenced the Middle East was the Baghdad Pact. The Pact was established by Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Britain in 1955 with the support of the US. According to Jasse, scholars have usually depicted the Baghdad Pact “as part of the Western Powers' strategy of containment of Russia through a series of encircling alliances” (Jasse, 1991).

The new world order after the war, a bipolar world, affected the Middle East as well. In the Cold war, Middle Eastern states were divided into camps like other countries in the world. In this context, rivalry between Iraq and Egypt was significant for the trajectory of Arab nationalism. After WW I Iraq emerged as a leader of the Arab world. However, the rise of Egypt in the region with Pan-Arabist aspirations brought these two states into an ideological confrontation and the pact was a factor that accelerated the clash. This period is called the “Arab Cold War” (Kerr, 1974).

While Iraq was cooperating with Western camp due to historical relations, on the other side, although Egypt participated in the non-alignment movement, the country had close ties with the USSR. Nasser was critical of Iraq for collaboration with the West and according to him, this was a betrayal of the Arab people because they didn't support Egypt’s position, which was advocating Pan-Arabism, the true path for the

Arabs. In essence, besides the Cold War effect, the Egypt-Iraq rivalry was the result of an ongoing clash of two ideologies in Arab politics, which were transnational Arab nationalism backed by Egypt and state-nationalism supported by Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

In response to the Baghdad Pact, Nasser preferred to create his own bloc. After the declaration of the Baghdad Pact, Egypt announced its alliance with Syria, another country that had close relations with the USSR. Later, this alliance would become a unification of the two countries under the name of the United Arab Republic. As Podeh and Winckler describe it;

“A major event...was the formation of the United Arab Republic—the unification of Egypt and Syria—on February 1, 1958. The Foreign Ministry viewed the unification as “the beginning of the fulfillment of Nasser’s vision of an Arab empire signifying one nation, one government, and one leader (Podeh, Winckler, 2004)

The unity between Egypt and Syria was accepted as the apex of Pan-Arabism; however, it would last just three years. Increased Egyptian political pressure in Syria, in terms of giving key positions to Nasserists, led to a reaction among Syrians and the result was secession from the unified state. Before the unification, there had already been some difficulties, as has been discussed. The economic and political differences between these countries were the main obstacles. (Palmer, 1966)

### ***2.5. Creation of the Baath Party***

After WW II, the other important event for Arab nationalism was the rise of the Baath Party. “The Ba’th party was a second factor that contributed to the powerful emergence of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s...” (Chalala, 1987). It turned out to be an important political factor eventually and gained supporters throughout the Arab lands. The party was founded by Christian Michel Aflaq and Muslim Salah-al-Din al-Bitar in Damascus in 1946. Their aim was to bring Arabs together under a unified state and while doing this they advocated a kind of socialist version of nationalism. The party's famous slogan was “One Arab Nation with an Immortal Mission” which represented

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<sup>5</sup> This rivalry is also described as *watanniyya* (state nationalism) vs *qawmiyya* (arab nationalism)

their spectrum. “As the first Arab political party with Pan-Arabist goals, the Baath had a leading role in spreading the doctrine of unity in the 1950s” (Dewlin, 1991,). It gained momentum in the 1950s, especially in Syria and Iraq but the unity between Egypt and Syria would prevent further growth. With Nasser's authority and popularity which originated from that unity, they did not have the opportunity of spreading in political terms.

However, after the unsuccessful unity between Egypt and Syria, Baath would clash with Nasser and they seized power in Syria and Iraq in 1963 with coup d'etats. As Tibi states “The struggle for the leadership of the Pan-Arab movement between the individual Arab states, especially between Nasserism and the Baath Party, resulted in an inter-Arab Cold War” (Tibi, 1997).

This Arab Cold War was an ongoing process since the late 1950s and with the failed Arab unity this process gathered pace and continued until 1967 and it should be stressed that this Arab Cold War was not limited to Baath-Nasser rivalry.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, another clash was the historical Saudi-Hashemite political competition. The struggle between these two dynasties continued until 1958, the year when the Hashemite Dynasty in Iraq was overthrown by General Abd Al-Karim Qasim with a coup.

## ***2.6. The First Sparks of the Extremists Sentiments***

The issue of Islamic extremism started to undergo a revival with the thoughts of Sayyid Qutb in the 1950s. Sayyid Qutb was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and a teacher who had a difference of opinion with Hassan-al Hidaybi, the leader of the Brotherhood. Qutb's thoughts concerning Islam are considered to be one of the first sparks of extremist sentiment in the 21st century and he inspired the Muslim younger generation and he was executed by Nasser due to his opinions<sup>7</sup>. According to him, whenever Muslims try to gain political participation they are repressed every time by

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<sup>6</sup> Also, the confrontation between Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the Northern Yemen Civil war was one of the examples about this issue

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note here that, when he was developing these ideas, he lived many years in prison under brutal conditions.

the “western-secular collaborator leaders of the region” and to avert this, radical decisions had to be taken. On his opinions, Calvert states that;

More systematically than others before him, he established Islam as a culturally authentic, programmatic ideology at odds with the various political orders dominating the Muslim world... Qutb provided Islamist militants the justification for forcefully, even violently confronting the secular bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes of the Muslim world” (Calvert, 2013)

On the other hand, the important thing about him was his classification of people. As Fadl puts it, that he separated society into those people who live as the “true faithful” against those who have experience “in the age of jahiliyya”<sup>8</sup>. According to that categorization, all Muslims should migrate “to the land of true Islam; those who failed to do so were to be considered apostates and infidel” (Fadl, 2005).

### ***2.7. The Failure of Pan-Arabism and Its Consequences: The Rise of State Nationalism and Islamic Politics***

In 1967, there was a significant turning point which would cause the end of Pan-Arabism. In the process of its birth and maturation, it had always been faced with serious challenges. Intra-Arab rivalries, especially between Iraq-Egypt and Baath-Nasser, the unsuccessful unity between Syria and Egypt, and other political reasons hindered Pan-Arab unity. However, the decisive victory of Israel in the Six Day War in 1967, radically erased the Pan-Arabist dreams. The defeat of four states, Egypt, Syria, Transjordan, and Iraq against Israel was a disaster.

The biggest consequence of the war was the questioning of Pan-Arabism and it was argued that it was not the authentic ideology that would lead to the unification of the Arabs. Subsequently, different ideologies came forward for Arab politics. One of them was the rise of Islamic politics. Tibi argues that the decisive victory of Israel in the Six-Day War 1967 was a “turning point “which caused the ascent of Islamic

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<sup>8</sup> It refers to pre-Islamic ignorance and darkness

fundamentalism, contrary to the existing belief that it stemmed from the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 (Tibi, 2001).

One of the important ideologies that would arise after the period of 1967 was state nationalism. As Dawisha (2003) indicated, in the new period, the post-1967 era, *wataniya* (state identity) was the determining factor in the political relations between the Arab states rather than *qawmiyya* (national identity). According to Ajami, in the 1970s “Slowly and grimly... a "normal" state system is becoming a fact of life.” (Ajami, 1978). Arab states were adopting this system gradually, like Hafez Assad in Syria. “... he has managed to rid Syria of a great deal of its romanticism and extremism, and to move it to the center of Arab politics. To do so, he put an entire tradition behind him...” (Ajami, 1978). On the other hand, the same thing was being experienced in Iraq, as well. In his speech Saddam described the new era in this way:

*“(Arab Unity) It could have been acceptable ten or twenty years ago. We have to take into consideration the change which the Arab mind and psyche have undergone. We must see the world as it is. Any Arab would have wished to see the Arab nation as one state. . . . But these are sheer dreams. The Arab reality is that the Arabs are now twenty-two states, and we have to behave accordingly. . . .Unity must give strength to its partners, not cancel their national identity” (Helms, 1984).*

The same radical change could also be seen in Egypt. After the defeat of the Six Day War and the death of Nasser, with Anwar Sadat’s coming to power Egypt adopted the idea of state nationalism which was the new reality in Arab politics. The most important example of the changing policy of Egypt was the Camp David Agreement in 1978 with Israel which aimed to bring peace to the region. Seale argues “That Egypt’s Pan-Arab phase, which had begun twenty years earlier, was over” (Seale,1989).

Another reality which arose after the 1967 period was what Owen calls the “Durability of the Arab regimes and existing states”. The 1970s and 1980s were different from the 1950s and 1960s, there were no coup attempts or overthrown regimes, except Sudan and this durability stemmed from increasing state power (Owen, 1992). With the rise

of state power and state nationalism, Arab states started to embrace their own national interest.<sup>9</sup> There were many exemplified issues. For instance, "...The lack of Arab response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 directed specifically at the symbol of the Arab nation" (Valbjorn, 2009). In the Iran-Iraq war, the close alliance between Syria and Persian Iran against Iraq, the invasion of Kuwait by another Arab state, Saddam's Iraq, and Western intervention in Iraq and the silence of other Arab states.

As already touched upon, another idea was the Islamic politics which started to gain strength in the aftermath of the Six Day War. It evolved into varieties, the most important ones were political Islam and Islamic extremism. Some of them adopted a political route in order to capture power. The Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan) was the most inspiring group in this context. The group was formed in 1928 in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna and it matured throughout the years in the political arena. Because of their experience, it would become a role model for the other groups that aimed to struggle without guns. Also, these groups have been identified as moderate due to their actions, beliefs and political ideals.

In this thesis, I particularly analyze Islamic extremism. With the failure of Pan-Arabism, it came to the forefront as a new political tool for Muslims and two events the Islamic Revolution in Iran and Soviet invasion to Afghanistan inspired extremist groups. With the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, when the Islamist government came to power, it became clear that an alternative political governance was possible for Muslims. Some of the extremist groups undertook the struggle against their governments by drawing on the example of the revolution in Iran.

On the other hand, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which aimed to protect the communist regime against Muslims, caused the intensification of extremist group activities in Afghanistan. Many foreign groups that had radical thoughts flocked to Afghanistan from different countries to fight or get training. Because of its geographical characteristics and substantial support from Gulf countries and the West,

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<sup>9</sup> Here I used the national interest to indicate the different Arab state's interest, not the whole Arab nation.

especially the US and Saudi Arabia, in terms of money and logistic, Afghanistan was called the “Safe Haven” (Burke, 2003).

Afghanistan was important because it was the first collective fight and experience among the members of extremist groups, even if there were disputes among the groups. However, when the war finished and the Soviets lost, the disorder in Afghanistan was still predominant. Afghan fractions in the country fought each other to get power. On the other hand, experienced foreign fighters who had come from different countries searched for new destinations to fight. These destinations would be Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Palestine, and some of them stayed in Afghanistan and some of them returned to their home countries.

After the war ended two groups were in the forefront, Al Qaeda and the Taliban. “In the early 1980s, Abdullah Azzam founded the Maktab al Khidamat, which later morphed into an organization called al-Qaeda (the base). It provided logistical help and channeled foreign assistance to the mujahedin” (Beyer, 2001). Azzam was a Palestinian preacher who decided to go to the Afghan war and while there worked together with his old student from the university who had been impressed by him, Usama Bin Laden. According to Burke, the exact time of the rise of Al Qaeda was not clear. Before the 1990s, although there were some people who claimed that they had heard of this group, many fighters didn't know about it. They knew the Khidamat, but

after the bomb attack on the World Trade Center in the 1993 in the U.S, the name of Al Qaeda<sup>10</sup> started to be heard more and more between 1996-2003. (Burke, 2003).

On the other hand, the Taliban emerged in 1994 to face harsh economic and social conditions in the country.<sup>11</sup> As the Taliban swiftly became a dominant force in the country, relations between Al Qaeda and the Taliban would become important, because Al Qaeda was under the protection of the Taliban. However, the groups had different priorities, Al Qaeda supported more global actions and the Taliban were

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<sup>10</sup> Burke (2003) describes the Al Qaeda as “A hardcore, a network of co-opted groups and ideology”

<sup>11</sup> “The Taliban were Afghan refugees and war veterans based in rural Pakistani and Afghan *madrasahs*, or Islamic religious schools. Their arrival on the Afghan stage marked the end of the period of intra-mujahideen civil war.”(Goodson, 2001, p.77).

focused more on Afghanistan. As Kurzman (2011) puts that “The Taliban were primarily interested in ruling a single territory: Afghanistan. They had no aspirations to export their revolution to other lands; that was al- Qaida’s obsession”.

## ***2.8 The end of the Cold War and the Aftermath***

The end of the Cold War was another important event that would influence the Middle East, as Samuel Huntington argued “It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural” (Huntington, 1993). It had been suggested that with the collapse of the USSR ideological conflicts would disappear and be replaced by cultural, especially ethnic and religious conflicts.

On the other hand, the US had no real enemy with the end of the Cold War and the bipolar system turned into a unipolar system and when the Soviets fell there was no need for the Afghan groups which were backed by them. Also, the which process started through the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan and ended up with their collapse encouraged extremist groups because they assumed that they had had a big part in this. In the light of these thoughts, a new struggle was in being shaped, especially with the landing of US troops in Saudi Arabia against Saddam's threat and the refusal of Bin Laden's offer to defend the kingdom was the first spark of this struggle. The new era for Islamic extremism would be a more visible one than that based on the confrontation between the US and Al Qaeda.

The rise of Islamic extremism within the transnational discourse by Al-Qaeda, based on the “far enemy”, was revealed in its final version in the 9/11 attacks. The attacks were the result of a process which had started from the early 1990s and they had both a positive and negative effect on Al-Qaeda; however, the negative effects outweighed the positive ones, as has been argued. One of the important ideologues of the Al Qaeda, Abu Musab al-Suri<sup>12</sup>, depicted the attacks this way;

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<sup>12</sup> For more information about Abu Musab al-Suri see the “ Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda” Cruickshanki, P. And Ali, M.H. 2007



*“According to Suri, the negative rebound effects of the 9/11 attacks were greater than their positive consequences. Sanctuaries in London and Afghanistan were dismantled, and military, police, and financial pressures on Al Qaeda became so great that the jihadist leaders who had not already been arrested or killed were on high alert. . .” (Kepel, 2008)*

Apparently, the group started to lose power due to the invasion of Afghanistan, as retaliation for the 9/11 attacks, by coalition forces led by the US. On the other hand, the international campaign “War on Terror” initiated by the US to challenge the radical groups had negative consequences on the group. However, these efforts had a different kind of positive effect on the movement, as argued by Sageman (2008). He argued that a kind of “Leaderless Jihad” started to emerge which included features of fluidity, independency, and unpredictability. In a way, it was the thing that had been designated by the Suri, conceiving Al Qaeda as a system. (Rej, 2016)

Here it's important to note that in other parts of the world armed Islamic extremist struggle was continuing separately from Al-Qaeda, like in Algeria and Egypt. But the thing that put the Al-Qaeda in the forefront was their actions and the enemy that they selected. On the other hand, in some Middle Eastern countries, like Iraq and Syria, heavy repression against extremists and strong state power that had been built up since the 1970s, prohibited the mounting of any kind of Islamic extremist groups (except Syria between the years of 1976-1982) until the invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring.

After Al Qaeda went underground, the invasion of Iraq led by the US caused a new phenomenon, ISIS. The group had its origins in Jama‘at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTJWJ) which was founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in order to fight in Jordan and Afghanistan but later, with the Iraq war, started to expand in Iraq. It became “Al-Qaeda in Iraq” in 2004 as a result of pledging allegiance to Al-Qaeda. At first, it was operating as a franchise; however, later it reached a more independent position. On different points, this new group split with Al Qaeda.

For example, the process of targeting Shias starting with Zarqawi in order to mobilize Sunnis would turn into a kind of sectarian war, action that has never been approved of by Al Qaeda. In 2006 the group’s name was changed to the Islamic State of Iraq, due

to its merging with other groups, by the new leader Abu Omar al Baghdadi, after the death of Zarqawi. However, it started to lose power due to the Sahwa council which was established from among the Sunni tribes by the US to fight against ISIS. (Gerges, 2016)

In the ongoing process, the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and sectarian government policies which prioritized the Shias followed by Nouri Al Maliki, the prime minister of Iraq, caused conditions that resulted in ISIS surfacing again. In 2013 the group assumed its last form, the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham. At first, Iraq was the operational base but, especially with the Arab Spring that created disorder and a power-vacuum, they expanded toward Syria. Here the crucial point is that a group from within ISIS was sent to Syria in 2011 to establish a social base for the group. Later it became Jabahat al Nusra, led by Abu Mohammad al-Julani in 2012. However, in 2013 Baghdadi stated that al Nusra was an offshoot of ISIS and they thus proclaimed ISIS involvement in Syria. This was rejected by Julani and he swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda and after that point, the tension between these two groups would increase and turn into bloodshed (Lister, 2014).

As can be seen, the new era started with the 2000s, which indicated the rise of Islamic extremism in the Middle East. This situation was unusual for some countries like Iraq and Syria (except for the years of 1976-1982). They never experienced these type of actions because of the strong repression under the Baath party; however, the invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring's effect on Syria changed the balance.

On the other hand, as will be mentioned in chapters two and three in Iraq and Syria, at the hands of autocrats nationalism gradually turned into a tool that, since the 1970s, aimed to protect regime survival. The absence of inclusive politics and rudimentary state identities induced the rise of Islamic extremism and the period after the 2000s can be seen from this perspective. Also, the new methods that were adopted by the extremist groups would contribute to their rise and although currently they seemed to have been defeated, the conditions that created them still exist (Hellyer, H.A, 2019).

In the ongoing period, what the region needs is new social contracts based on citizenship rather than ethnic, religious, tribal, clan affinities. Under just these

circumstances, new nationalisms can be burgeoned with the purpose of incorporating different public groups. Otherwise, if the old social contracts based on authoritarianism continue, nothing will change.



## CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *3.1. The Emergence of Nationalism*

Religion and its relation with nationalism have always been discussed. The question was whether nationalism could be compatible with religion or not. In the 18th century, with the enlightenment process, thinkers such as Voltaire, Rousseau and Hume claimed that “principles governing nature and... universe could be understood through the use of reason alone... No longer were the bible, clergy or sacred texts needed to explain why certain events occurred or existed in the universe” (Riefer, 2003).

This perception brought a questioning of the relationship between the state authority and religion. On that point, “The Enlightenment philosophers made the separation of state authority from religion an essential condition for freedom...” (Friedland, 2001) The essential idea was to make reasoning dominant over religion again as it had been in ancient Greek times. In the ongoing process, the notion of modernity emerged through the “enlightenment process” that would shape first Europe then the world again, in terms of social life and organizational forms.

As products of modernity, nation, nationalism and secularism came into the picture and shaped communities anew. Another significant turning point was the French Revolution, that was related to this process. According to Hobsbawm, the French Revolution made freedom of thought possible and it contributed to the strengthening of nationalism. After the revolution, with the political gains, nationalism found an appropriate atmosphere for itself (Hobsbawm, 1990).

The phenomenon of nationalism superseded the old political systems swiftly, as has been argued. However, this was the modernist theory which was linked to the modernity process on when and how nationalism occurred. On the other, primordialists argued that contrary to the modernist theory that conceived nationalism as a new phenomenon, they assumed that nationalism was a naturally given phenomenon which came from earlier times. (Özkırımlı, 2000)

Besides this, there are ethno-symbolists (Smith, 2009) who argue that neither primordialists nor modernists are correct single-handedly; however, they accepted that nationalism is a product of the modern century but they highlight the ethnic past which is absent in modernist theory.

In modernist theory, there is another notion, *instrumentalism*, which will be used in section four to analyze the governments in Syria and Iraq. It sees nationalism and ethnic identities as tools in the hands of elites to capture political power or reinforce their political position. According to this, ethnic identities have changeable characteristics due to political events, on the other hand, competition between the elites would affect the ethnic groups in terms of how they define themselves, so ethnic identities are not given (Brass, 1991). In the same vein, Hobsbawm explains the nationalism in the context of political interests. In his famous work *The Invention of Tradition* (1986) he argues that nations and nationalism were products of social engineering and he highlights the importance of invented traditions which include ceremonies, rules, habits, and practices. Another crucial theory is the “Imagined Communities” argued by Anderson (1991). He argues that nation and nationalism is a particular cultural building (artefact) and it is imagined because even the members of the smallest nations wouldn’t know other members of the community, however, the imagination of togetherness would continue.

Discussion over the separation of religious and state authority paved the way for the emergence of secularism and it always was to be conceptualized with nationalism. The spread of a secular type of nationalism from Europe to other parts of the world led to important disagreements in terms of how it was to be implemented in those non-European countries. For example, if we look at Muslim states which had no experience of secularism and nationalism before, they have been forced to rationalize these systems and while it appeared to succeed at first, today it seems to have failed due to religious and ethnic conflicts.

### ***3.2. Nationalism in the Muslim Regions and Its Relationship with Religion***

Why has nationalism failed in Muslim countries or has it really failed? To answer this question, comparing religion and nationalism can be beneficial because of the many contradictions involved.

Firstly, the main problematic issue was concerning the secular feature of nationalism. In Islam, throughout the centuries, there has never been a distinction between the religious and state authority, unlike Christianity, especially Protestantism. In Islam there is no supreme authority comparable to the Pope in Roman Catholicism, there was no clergy and mosques weren't like churches, in this context how can we evaluate Islam's position from the perspective of Christianity? (Bulaç, 1990). It can be argued that nationalism came to the Muslim or Arab world from outside therefore nationalism is not indigenous ideology. However, religion was more indigenous for these soils because of the historical processes that they faced.

This was one of the reasons of emerging the Islamic reformist movements. With the rise of secularism in the Muslim lands Islam had lost its place and their purpose was the integration of Islam into the public sphere again. However, as has been argued that nationalism may work with the religion out of secularism.

In the debate between religion and nationalism, it was argued by other scholars that “..The emergence and form of the Western secular nation-state has itself everything do with Christianity, and Protestantism in particular” (Bendix 1978, Harrison 1998, McLoughlin 1978, Rokkan 1975, Tilly 1998, as cited in Friedland, 2001). In a same line, scholars like Brubaker criticize the belief that nationalism is a specifically secular phenomenon and he treats religion and nationalism as an analogous concept. (Brubaker, 2012) In the same way Gorski and Dervisoglu (2013) assert that;

*“a) modern nationalism may have a religious lineage (e.g., in narratives of chosen-ness); (b) national identities have often formed along religious cleavages (e.g., between Protestants and Catholics, Hindus and Muslims); (c) nationalist rhetoric and ritual often borrow from religion”.*

In the same vein, other scholars like Kinvall argue that “religion shares many of the characteristics of nationalism, and religion and nationalism are often mixed”(Kinvall, 2004). On the other, Shenhav argues that “modern nationalism follows two contradictory principles that operate simultaneously: hybridization and purification. Hybridization refers to the mixing of “religious” and “secular” practices...”(Shenhav, 2006)

The interaction between nationalism and religion gave birth to what Smith called the “politicization of religion” and the “messianisation of politics”. Political leaders can be associated with religious terms like “savior” and on the other hand, prophets or saints can be turned into “national heroes”. “Patriotic heroes and national geniuses, who embody and exemplify such authenticity and sacrifice themselves for the community, are the equivalent of prophets and messiah-saviours” (Smith, 2000).

As can be seen, there is a direct relationship between religion and nationalism as argued by different scholars. To exemplify, this situation can be seen in the Muslim and Christian worlds. In Muslim countries, it started with of the exclusion of Islam from the public sphere. In the ongoing process, secularization was seen as a western import “to encroach“ on Muslim lands and this anti-secular political situation fuelled what Jurgensmayer called religious nationalism.

“For Mark Juergensmeyer, such ‘religious nationalisms’ have become a major force in world politics seeking to wrest the nation from the arms of the secular state” (Smith, 2000). Jurgensmeyer categorized religious nationalism into three types. The first is ethnic-religious nationalism that is linked to people and land. In this type, religion ensures the identity that fuses people and specific places, like the movements in Chechnya, Tajikistan, Sri Lankan and Kashmir. The second is ideological religious nationalism that is related to ideas and beliefs. For example, the Islamic revolution in Iran and the subsequent process. The third is ethno-ideological religious nationalism which is a mixture of the other two. They have enemies from both sides, ethnic rivals and secular leaders in terms of ideology. For instance, the Hamas movement in Palestine (Jurgensmeyer, 1996).

In parallel with this issue, scholars have argued that religion has an importance and even a pivotal role in the creation of non-Western nationalist movements (Jaffrelot 2007, Little & Swearer 2006). Friedland (2001) asserts that the nationalisms of Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, India, Palestine and Israel are all “suffused with religious narrative and myth, symbolism and ritual”

Also, for the West, Hefner (1998) suggests that in particular Western societies religion have a crucial power over the public sphere. On the other, Morone (2003) contends that the nationalism of America is mixed with biblical and religious elements. He argued that this mix of nationalism and religion was turned into a standard practice in the politics of America. In the same vein, over the role of religion in the West, Blaug argues that “Some fifty years ago, many social scientists believed that Christianity and democracy were incompatible. But today the most deep-rooted democracies are in the Christian heartland” (Bayat, 2007).

To sum up, for the Muslim countries, over the question of whether nationalism failed or not, it can be seen that nationalism included more religious sentiments and it seems to be still in existence in particular states (not Iraq and Syria) independently of its secular features. For Iraq and Syria, as will be discussed later, the authoritarian government types that failed to create inclusive national agenda hindered the rise of any type of nationalist version except the instrumental nationalism. Another possible explanation for the failure of nationalism can be the nationalism is a product of export from Europe. Therefore it wasn't appropriate political ideology for the Muslims or Arabs and it never suited to them, the religion was at the forefront throughout the decades. However, as illustrated above, in some Muslim countries nationalism and religion are intertwined and it shows that nationalism has been evolved into varieties independent of its secular feature in these lands

### ***3.3. Umma versus Nation***

The second problematic issue was between Islam's understanding of umma and the concept of the nation. As Zubaida argues, Islamic scholars in politics have constantly asserted that “the Muslim’s nationality is his faith’. Many such Muslims have denounced nationalism for dividing the Muslim community, the umma, into



fragmentary units...” (Zubadia, 2014). According to Hallaq umma is “... the Community consists of the totality of believers who are, as believers, equal to each other in value and thus stand undifferentiated before God (Hallaq, 2012).

Throughout the centuries the notion of the “umma” prevailed in Muslim societies; however, with the end of the 19th period, when nationalism and the idea of nation gradually entered into Muslim societies, the notion of umma would be questioned. As Tibi argues, “The application of the Western concept of the nation led to the creation of the umma Arabiyya (the Arab nation) and the abandonment of the umma Islamiyya (the community of Islam and its universal claims)” (Tibi, 2001).

For example, Islamist thinkers that came to prominence in the 19th and 20th century, such as Abd al-Rahmān Kawākibī, Rashid Rida, Muhammad Abduh, brought a new aspect to the umma. For example, Kawakibi argued that “Of all ethnic groups, Arabs are the most qualified to be viewed as the source of Islam and as providing the role model for all Muslims” (Soleimani, 2016). Also, as can be realized from other Arab scholars’ work at that time, they tried to put the Arabs before other nations in terms of loyalty to the understanding of umma.

On the other hand, the Turkification policy that was adopted by the Committee of Union and Progress served to deepen the separation between the umma and nation, especially on Arab soils. This introduction of nationalism to Islamic societies brought results after World War I. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and, more importantly, the abolition of the Caliphate which had been accepted as a representative of the whole Muslim community(umma) caused the rise of nationalism. With many new Muslim states emerging after World War I, the idea of umma remained an utopian ideal.

However, about the umma issue radical groups were obsessive about the umma issue. Today, Islamic State is the foremost example with their discourse about demolishing borders and revitalizing the umma. On the other hand, for example, political Islamist groups have adopted the reality of nation-state identity. (Roy,1994).

Lapidus gives examples about international Muslim organizations, in terms of how they act and how they have inherited the notion of the nation-state. He says that

although these organizations and movements (The Organization of Islamic Conference, the Muslim World League backed by Saudi Arabia, Islamic Call Society supported by Libya and also international movements such as Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami) appealed to universal ideas, in fact they can be seen in the context of nation-states and their actions have prioritized their home country (Lapidus, 2001).

On this issue, Zubaida argued that the nation-state or country nationalism was the only political reality for the Arab states after the period of 1967. Although it could be argued to be the most artificial state, Kuwaiti national unity against Iraq in the Gulf war and during the Iran-Iraq war, the Iraqi Shias' position toward Iran were totally inspired by national feelings (Zubaida, 2004).

These examples show that the sense of belonging to a nation-state identity took precedence over an understanding of umma in Muslim countries. People's actions prioritize their home country rather than the whole Arab and Islamic world. However, especially after 2011, the Arab Spring process shook the existing order in the Middle East deeply. The emergence of failed and divided states, civil wars and Salafi-jihadi uprisings showed that in the new period nothing would be as it had been before, Islamic identities could come into prominence and national feelings could be damaged.

Also, contrary to Zubaida, as I will argue later, although state nationalism seemed to be a strong and political reality; however, for Iraq and Syria, it had serious internal problems. The lack of an inclusive national agenda, sect and clan type governing and the use of nationalism as an instrumental tool by the elites to protect their power would lead to the failure of nation-state identity in these lands.

### ***3.3. The Territory Between Islam and Nationalism***

The territory is the third contradictory issue in which discussion takes place between nationalism and Islam. In the essence of Islam, the world had been divided into two parts, the people who believe in Islam and those who do not believe, regardless of their nation. As argued by Khadduri (1956) "the law of Islam was based on the theory of a universal state". However, this idea of a universal state remained as a utopia for centuries. After the death of the Prophet Mohammed and the four Khalifas, the so-

called “golden age” ended and in the ongoing period, many Islamic empires fought each other to get territory and to become the only true legitimate Islamic rulers. It can be said that this idea was already problematic in itself historically, separately from nationalism. On the other hand, the essence of nationalism, contrary to Islam’s transnational understanding, indicates that a nation can only live in one particular land, a territorial state.

With regard to the discussion of territory between Islam and nationalism, the question that should be asked in contemporary politics is whether the territorial understanding has weakened or still it has significance. According to Saunders, “Importantly, territory, which was a vital component of earlier national movements, has lessened in importance in the current era of mass migration, deterritorialized communication platforms, and neo-liberal economic structures” (Saunders, 2008). In the current era, according to Saunders, territory has lost its previous importance due to external factors and it looks more like what Islam proposed at one point; the insignificance of a particular territory and the importance of transnationalism. With the development of transportation and communication tools, it should be stressed that globalism has a pivotal role in this issue as well.

Unlike the people who claimed that the weakening of territory was happening, there were others who suggested that it still has significance. According to Humphreys “Even militant Islamists, who have a historic transnational territorial ambit, indeed a universal ideal... almost all seek to create an Islamic order within the existent nation-states” (Humphreys 1999 as cited in Friedland, 2002). For instance, it can be seen in the Islamic State’s discourse. Besides the transnational discourse, they were mainly concentrated in Syria and Iraq, which indicates that control of a particular territory is one of the crucial components of ISIS strategy. Although they later changed the group name to “Islamic State” and demolished the borders, they used the name of Iraq and Syria (Levant) to describe their so-called state in particular times.

On the other hand, if we look at the so-called artificial Arab states, they interiorized the understanding of the territorial-nation state. Although they have been argued as “artificial” there weren't significant changes in their borders. Since the Sykes-Picot agreement, these states continued their existence until today. It could be argued that

the territorial nation-state understanding became a concrete reality in the Middle East in terms of durability.

Also, other new Islamic extremist groups adopted this understanding and started to control the large territories differently from the old groups to achieve their goals within the existing borders of nation-states. Currently, one of the important ones is Syrian groups which came into view with the Syrian civil war.

### ***3.4 The Clash of Civilizations***

Finally, I want to touch upon the Clash of Civilizations thesis argued by Huntington, in the context of religion and nationalism. As suggested in section two, Huntington argued that in the new era –after the end of the Cold War- ideological conflicts would be replaced by cultural ones. He was right about his perspective of new conflicts, despite the criticism that he received, because Islamist and extremist groups confronted the secular-nation states and the essence of the confrontation was cultural derived from the cultural differences between Islam and western modernity.

According to Islamist and extremist views, the aim was to find a solution to concepts that modernity had imposed on Islamic societies which were fundamentally different than their cultures. Some of them joined the political process and others started armed struggle to deal with this situation. In the ongoing process, as a consequence, religious conflicts in different Muslim regions like Palestine, Chechnya, Iraq, Bosnia in the 1990s gave rise to Islamic consciousness and caused the strengthening of pro-Islamic movements. Hezbollah in Lebanon, Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in Palestine and the National Outlook Movement in Turkey, would challenge secular western modernity in the Muslim world. (Al, 2019)

### ***3.5. Conclusion***

In the Middle East, while Islamic politics have gained momentum in the post-2000s, especially with extremist groups, nationalism continued to lose importance. In Iraq and Syria, religion became a more dominant force driving nationalism to mobilize the people.

The question of why nationalism has failed or if it still has importance in the region is an ongoing debate. As I have showed above and as is argued by scholars, religion and (nationalism never suited?) nationalism have affected each other and religion has tried to reduce the influence of secularism on nationalism. This can be accurate for particular Middle Eastern or Arab states; however, for Iraq and Syria, they didn't experience that type of understanding. For that particular time, Saddam had tried to use religion to bind the nation in the era of sanctions; however, it would fail because of the lack of necessary institutional developments as argued by Bunton (2009).

Also, in Iraq and Syria people saw their leaders as “enemy of the Islam”. For example, Jurgensmeyer (2010) gives an example from a Sunni mullah in Baghdad and his opinion toward Saddam as the “enemy of Islam” because he saw his policies as the imposition of secular nationalism.

Heavy repression of religious groups in Iraq and Syria prevented any emergence of national sentiments that could be encapsulated by Islam. The other factor from the perspective of religious nationalism could be a lack of colonial legacy for Iraq. Iraq was one of the earliest states that gained autonomy from Britain and unlike the other Arab states, nationalism was not much influenced by religious sentiments in their struggle. For Syria, the best example is the religious state institutions that were set up to control the scope of religion in the public. With this institutions, the state was able to promote an “official Islam”<sup>13</sup> that was conceived as religion that should be separated from state affairs, which paved the way for secular nationalism.

It can be said that different historical processes and increasing state authority, different from the other Arab countries, prevented religious-based nationalism in Iraq and Syria. However, it can be argued that during the Iraq-Iran war there was an increase in religious national identity which had its source in Saddam's discourse, which likened the war to Qadisiyyah<sup>14</sup>, to unite the different parts of Iraq. But, as argued by Riefer, when “the national leadership is suffering from a crisis of legitimacy, the call to defend the population’s religious national identity is often invoked” (Riefer, 2003). The war

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<sup>13</sup> Here I use the notion of official Islam as state-sponsored Islam

<sup>14</sup> For more information about the Qadisiyyah war and its usage see the ‘Saddam's Qadisiyyah’: Religion and History in the Service of State Ideology in Ba‘thi Iraq, Lewental, G.D, 2014

was one of the examples of this issue, as there were other periods when this method was used by Saddam, like the sanction-era.<sup>15</sup>

The picture that emerges indicates that the most problematic issue with nationalism in Iraq and Syria was the instrumentalization of it by the elites. The regimes which came to power in the 1970s in Iraq and Syria failed to create a broad and inclusive based state nationalism despite having the chance to do so. They used it instrumentally in order to protect their regime and ensure its survival. Therefore, the concept of nationalism used by the regimes showed differences related to different periods and events.

It can be hypothesized that the absence of an exact nationalist ideology, whether it is secular nationalism or religious nationalism, paved the way for instrumental nationalism which stemmed from the essence of regimes. Concerning this issue, they had lost their mobilization power and this passed to extremists because of their efforts that were brought new methods.

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<sup>15</sup> Its usage will be mentioned in the chapter three

## **CHAPTER 4: THE REASONS FOR THE INCREASING ISLAMIC EXTREMISM AGAINST NATIONALISM IN IRAQ AND SYRIA AFTER THE POST-COLD WAR ERA**

### ***4.1. Literature Review About the Rise of Islamic Extremism***

In the literature, there are different suggestions for the rise of Islamic extremism. One of the most prevalent claims is the failure of modernity in Third World countries. Fox argues that because of modernization's unsuccessful role in Third World countries that stemmed from its overlooking of local traditions and values, religious movements have found fertile ground related to people's grievances (Fox, 2001). On the other hand, Rabi (1995) suggests that the rise of fundamentalism has been related to the great turmoils "when the very existence of the Islamic polity or its moral integrity were perceived to be under threat".

Another common claim is that with increased oil prices, Arab monarchies have become crucial actors in the Arab world since 1973. Barnett (1998) depicts this situation as "the regional shift in power from ideology to oil, from symbolic capital to economic capital". As a result of this situation, Gulf countries which have adopted a more conservative and stricter understanding of Islam started to support Islamist and extremist groups with their economic power. The Syrian civil war can be argued to be the foremost example currently about this issue.

Some scholars argue that because of poverty Islamic militancy or extremism find opportunities (Lia and Schaub, 2004). Deeb (1992) argues that political and economic stagnation and deteriorating security situations contributed to rise of Militant Islam. Hafez (2003) Hafez argued that in the rise of Islamic extremism, state oppression toward the Islamic sphere was an important factor when it is fused with the institutional exclusion. Tibi (1996) depicted this phenomenon as a reaction to the problems of globalization. According to Davis (2004), the reason why Islamism and, to some extent extremism, was on the rise, was because of the vacuum that originated in the collapse of socialism and anarchism.

#### ***4.2. Identifying the Concepts***

To conceptualize Arab nationalism, Valbjorn and Bank offer four useful categories that depict it as *Pan Arabism*, the Arab World as a Pan-system, *Cultural Arabism*, the Arab World as a cultural space, *Political Arabism*, the Arab World as an anarchical international society and *Arab nationalism* constituted by a common language, history, culture, and tradition (Valbjorn and Bank, 2012). In this thesis, political Arabism will be useful, since this became the new reality with regard to the Syrian and Iraqi regimes after the period of 1967.

The rise of Islamic politics has been described using different terms like revivalism, rebirth, puritanism, fundamentalism, reassertion, awakening, reformism, resurgence, renewal, renaissance, revitalization, militancy, activism, integrist, millenarianism, messianism, return to Islam, and the march of Islam (Dekmejian,1995). However, when it turned into a stricter form, it started to be conceptualized with terms like fundamentalism, radicalism, and extremism. On the other hand, the new phenomenon first appeared under the name “Salafi Jihad” or “Jihadi Movement”, matured in the 1990s and continues today. Buyukkara describes it as a combination of Wahhabism and contemporary political Islam (Buyukkara, 2015). Abu Musab al-Suri, the so-called architect of global jihad, conceptualized it in a more specific way; the jihad movement consists of thoughts from the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb's method, the political fiqh of Ibn Taymiyyah and the Salafi school and the legacy of Wahhabi fiqh (Suri, 2018).

#### ***4.3. The Regimes in Iraq and Syria***

I would argue that looking at the period of the 1970s, when the new Baath regimes arose with Saddam and Hafez in Iraq and Syria, is critical in order to reach an understanding of the rise of Islamic extremism. First of all, I want to start by analyzing the Syrian and Iraqi regime, what they looked like and how nationalism was used by them between the 1960s and the 2000s and then in the subsequent period.

When considering the types of government of in Iraq and Syria which came to power in the 1960s, it is important to understand the comparison between Arab nationalism



and Islamic extremism. When the Pan-Arab system failed after the war with Israel, the Arab states started to adopt the *raison d'etat*<sup>16</sup> understanding, which was fortified by an understanding of state or territorial nationalism. Unlike other paradigms like Pan-Arabism, it stressed a more statist perception and led to the rise of long-lived regimes with authoritarian versions. Under secular Baath party rule Hafez Assad in Syria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq came to power in the 1970s and in this new period, the durability of the regimes was consolidated in terms of longevity and stability.

In both Iraq and Syria, it was apparent that there were no coups or radical government changes and these regimes survived until the 2000s. On the other hand, the use of repression as an indispensable part of authoritarianism surfaced when they were consolidating their power and they tried to most rush any type of opposition movement.

Some of the famous opposition movements were Islamist groups, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. Because of the harsh measures taken against Islamist groups, one group was left from the main body of the Muslim Brotherhood, between the years of 1976-1982 and this group “waged a violent campaign against the Baath regime, known as the Islamic revolt” (Ziser, 2001). However, they were brutally repressed by the regime and lost the fight. In Iraq, historically there had been no similar movements and extremist groups had no strong social roots until the 2000s, thanks to the authoritarian rule of the regime. The oppressed ones were the Shias and the Kurds due to their opposition movements and conspicuousness (Dawisha, 2009).

Besides this pressure, these regimes adopted a top-down method to Islamize society again (Bozarlsan, 2010), to get religious legitimacy and to struggle with Islamist groups. For example, in Iraq, Saddam “...launched a national Faith Campaign in 1993, which provided overt state support for religious symbols, laws, practices, education, and institutions” (Faust, 2015). The same situation could be seen in Syria, where Hafez Assad started to adopt policies which included “building mosques, patronizing the ulama, propagating Islam in the mass media... “and “he also tried to foster a conservative (Al-Azhar like) Islamic establishment to channel Islamic currents and

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<sup>16</sup> National interest

legitimate the regime” (Hinnebusch, 2002). Also, there were some symbolic steps. Saddam added “Allah-u Akbar” to the Iraqi flag and Assad determined that the state's official religion was Islam.

As Kramer argues, “Arab nationalists had always regarded Islamic loyalty as a potential rival, and had tried to disarm it by incorporating Islam as a primary element in Arab nationalism” (Kramer, 1993). Efforts that were implemented in Iraq and Syria can be seen in this perspective. Rather than challenging Islam overtly, they started to apply different policies by giving concessions to the Islamic sphere.

However, neither of these regimes were loyal to the principles of Arab nationalism, nor was Arab nationalism as powerful in the region as before. The primary element which had been keeping Islam for years under control was very weak. Islam, that had been restrained by Arab nationalism for years found various forms as a result of the rise of Islamic politics and extremism was one of them. This issue can be viewed as mentioned in chapter two. Firstly, these efforts prevented the development of a kind of religious nationalism among the public by controlling the scope of religion and secondly, these efforts can be argued as instrumental and dependent on the political atmosphere.

On the other hand, these regimes gradually turned into a clan or sect type of ruling. In Syria Alawites and in Iraq Sunnis, especially Tikritis, were placed in important positions (in the army, ministry of defense, intelligence service, and ruling mechanisms) even if they were minorities. Van Dam (1981) argues that although Hafez Assad had complex relations with other groups and elites, the minority of the Alawi sect had an important influence in the ruling process. They started to fill important positions to defend the core of the regime, as argued by Rabinovich (1972 as cited in Hinnerbusch, 2001) “the Alawi minority sect has dominated it (regime).…”

On the other side, the same happened in Iraq due to the efforts of the regime which started to create their own networks in the army, police and, etc. It was described as “Saddamist” (Dawisha, 2009) and it was described as a “Tikriti” state due to the appointments made of people of the Tikriti region, where Saddam was born, to important command echelon and state positions.

The role of nationalism in these regimes was determined by the principles of the Baath party. This was a kind of socialist and secular Arab nationalism, aimed at unifying the Arabs (Sen, 2004) and the role of Islam in this nationalism was depicted as Arabism being the body and Islam being the spirit (Aflaq,1943). However, when these regimes started to become a clan type of government, nationalism turned into a tool in the hands of these regimes to ensure their survival. Here the term "instrumentalism" in nationalism literature, as argued by Paul R. Brass, would be useful to understand the role of nationalism in these regimes.

He argued that ethnic identities and nationalism were tools in the hands of elites to capture political power or to protect their positions. (Özkırımlı, 2000). Also, he suggested that political and economic conditions can affect the attitudes of the elites and they can start to drop or change their ethnic agenda and stressed collaboration among the different groups in the country based on their common interest. (Brass, 1991).

In the light of these thoughts, Iraq and Syria could fit this definition. For example, in Iraq and Syria, there have been no national movements since the 1970s (with some exceptions) or an inclusive national agenda because the regimes monopolized nationalism to preserve their dynasty and to shape the community under their nationalist perspective. For instance, in Iraq “the party was no longer leading- the family was leading. The party was no longer able to fulfil national identity...The family’s role was strengthened at the expense of the party’s and so national identity was lost...” (Haddad, 2014). In the same vein, “Assad's strategy of power consolidation, in relying on kin and tribe, necessarily enhanced the Alawi predominance... (Hinnebusch, 2002).

Both regimes were based on minority status as a result of their political actions and despite their nationalist discourse in speeches, they didn't have the same appeal in their actions and it became superseded by kin, sect or clanship relations. There was an exclusionary nation-building process that demonizes the others who don't support the Baath. On the other hand, regarding the second thought of Brass's, this situation could clearly be seen in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, during the period after 1991, with the heavy sanction related to the Second Gulf War, the country entered both political and

economic crises. With rebellions in the south and north, the regime would start cooperation with tribes which were seen as some of the important obstacles preventing national unity. They began to be seen as a component of Iraqi identity and Saddam defined the Baath as “the tribe encompassing all tribes” (Crane, 2003). In Syria, for example, the Kurds were oppressed by the regime for years because of their ethnic identity; however, when the political condition changed with the Arab Spring, the regime started collaboration with the Kurds.

#### ***4.4. The Subsequent Period***

In the period which started with the 2000s, the autocratic leaders of Iraq and Syria were gone. In Syria, Bashar Assad came to power with the death of his father and in Iraq, Shias took over the government with the toppling of Saddam Hussein by the U.S-led coalition forces. However, these changes couldn't provide new policies that would include the whole nation. In Syria, the old political system, which was delineated as a police state that blocked any attempt at calls for reform, continued with Bashar Assad.

Bashar inherited the same political agenda from his father and continued to obstruct any kind of reform whether in the political or economic spheres (Borshchevskaya, 2010). However, there were reform attempts toward the Islamic sphere which were short-lived. For example, Pierre argues that “the best way to ensure its survival (the regime) was not liberalization but the reaffirmation of the old red lines starting with the prohibition of any relationship with the Muslim Brothers” (Pierre, 2013).

As previously argued, nationalism was still a tool in the hands of minority groups due to the regime policies that did not adopt an inclusive agenda, just as it had been in the Hafez era. The Arab Spring process was one of the results of the Bashar era which involved lack of inclusive nationalist policies. However, it can be argued that it had been a continuing process since his father Assad and had its roots in that period.

On the other hand, Shias who were oppressed by the Saddam regime for years came to power with the invasion of Iraq. This new period was extremely problematic concerning the role of nationalism, As Haddad argues, in the early post-2003 era

nationalism had been absent, sectarian narratives prevailed and in the ongoing process, state nationalism lost its inclusiveness (Haddad, 2014).

Government policies that were made according to a sectarian identity rather than based on citizenship, were examples of the lack of inclusive national politics. There were many examples that brought a sectarian identity to the forefront in the period of Nouri al-Maliki. For example, the disintegration of the Sahwa movement that will be mentioned and the corruption of the Army related to sectarian appointments. However, on the other hand, Shia clerics "... appealed to Pan-Iraqi unity and nationalism" (Sayej, 2018). However, in the hands of Shia politicians, nationalism had become intertwined with sectarianism and was turned into a tool as in which the Sunni part of the country was excluded. (Haddad, 2014) The same political process which had been implemented in Saddam's era continued, just the parties were different.

#### ***4.5. The Trajectory of Islamic Extremism***

The process which started with the Afghan war gave birth to Islamic extremist groups. Its seeds had been sown by Qutb before but in terms of implementation, the war provided fertile ground. However, the ideology which came into the forefront after the war, the so-called "Salafi Jihad" or "Jihadi Movement" did not just consist of Qutb's thoughts, there were different ideologies involved that served to shape it, as previously mentioned. When the war finished in Afghanistan, there were two types of extremist ideology which were taking shape, localism, and globalism.

Volunteer fighters, called Arab Afghans who had participated in the war from the Arab countries had an important role in the spread of local extremist perceptions when they returned to their home countries, especially in Egypt and Algeria (Kepel, 2006). However, the social and economic conditions in those countries cannot be ignored, just to look at the role of Arab Afghans would be erroneous. The perception of local extremists was based more on controlling territories and struggling against incumbent local regimes, as distinct from the globalists. Like the Taliban in Afghanistan, the GIA in Algeria and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt and other groups tried to capture particular territories in order to impose sharia-based rules.

On the other hand, the globalists were conspicuous under the leadership of Al-Qaeda. According to them, the main enemy was the US and as long as it survived, efforts that aimed to struggle against local authorities were senseless. Contrary to the others, controlling a specific territory wasn't important in their ideology. Gerges describes their position as follows, "In conventional terms, al-Qaeda cannot be defeated because it does not have an army and does not hold territory" (Gerges, 2011). Also, the other Arab Afghans that traveled to Bosnia, Chechnya or other places, apart from their home countries, had an important role in changing the nature of conflicts and gave them a more transnational perception.

However, as argued by Hegghammer, after the mid-2000s some kind of hybridization occurred. The global groups also started to adopt local perceptions and in the same way, local groups (or revolutionaries) embraced global attitudes as well. The reasons for this mixture were, international political developments since 2001, structural economic problems, repression, changes in the media and communication, and increased radicalization-tendencies to see the enemy everywhere (Hegghammer, 2009).

This situation can clearly be seen in Iraq and Syria with ISIS and to some extent the group formerly called al-Nusra, now Hayat Tahrir-al Sham and other Islamist groups. Especially ISIS, with its high number of foreign fighters, addressed transnational discourse, while they embarked on local strategies to get the support of the locals. Also, smaller(local) groups used the same tactic that included a broader discourse (umma) to get money or weapons from other parts of the Muslim community.

The hybridization led to both weaknesses and strengths, however; I would argue that with this situation (in Iraq and Syria), the groups could reach a large part of the population and it would lead to obtaining more support in terms of mobilization, manpower and, money.

#### ***4.6. A Comparison: The reasons for the Increasing Islamic Extremism Against Nationalism in Iraq and Syria After the Post-Cold War Era***

Bozarslan has argued that the weakening of the Middle East States was because of their incapability of mobilizing society with the aim of national action or ideology. (Bozarslan, 2012) After the war period with Israel ended, there was nothing left to mobilize the public against a common enemy. The discourse of Arab nationalism had always been anti-Zionist after the period of WWII. It had identified itself through an anti-Israel perception; however, when the core of its discourse failed, the idea would disappear, as well. It was unable to find a new common enemy for itself again, and it became transformed. In the new period, political Arabism or state nationalism would be in the forefront.

In the new era, the same problem, as argued by Bozarslan, would continue for Iraq and Syria. With the rise of the Baath regimes, they were started to adopt more statist policies, however, they couldn't mobilize the public on the basis of inclusive national politics. In Syria, there had always been disagreement among different groups in the country, ever since Assad came to power. Islamists always took the lead in the opposition even if there were particular periods of détente. On the other hand, Kurds had been oppressed by the regime for years and other minorities in the country, such as Christians and Druzes had been absent from the political field for years. Also, there were some periods when conflicts among the different groups in the country intensified. For example, in the 1976 Lebanon war, the position Syria took against the Palestinians and Muslims in defense of Christians damaged the legitimacy of the Syrian regime in the eyes of Arab nationalists and Sunnis.

Iraq was already a divided country due to ethnicity and sects; however, this became a more visible situation with Saddam's rule (Haddad, 2014). Inclusive policies were not easy in that divided country; however, Saddam tried to strike a balance among the parties, at the start of his rule he gave some autonomy to the Kurds and Shia demands were examined. However, the Iran-Iraq war, the sanction-era and ever-increasing Baath power put obstacles in the way of the normalization of the country. Sect identities began to predominate, Shias started to be seen as "Iranian traitors" and in the same way, the Kurds were also viewed as disloyal. But it should be noted that in the

Iraq-Iran war, even the Shia Iraqis fought in the war against Iran. However, if we look at the discourse of war, besides the national elements, religious factors had crucial importance. (Lewental, 2014) The same circumstances continued for both states for the period after the 2000s and the grievances of the people would come to light with the Arab Spring process.

In both cases, the minority position of the regimes, the lack of finding sufficient grounds for an inclusive national agenda and the usage of nationalism were obstacles for mobilizing the public, even if they declared themselves to be representative of the whole country. As correctly argued by Myhill (2010) "...where Muslim states have relatively coherent national identities, as in Turkey, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, violent fundamentalism has been an incomparably weaker factor than elsewhere". In Iraq and Syria, the fragile national identities that stemmed from the regimes' use of nationalism prevented that type of coherent national identity and the mobilization of the public in a common cause and it paved the way for the rise of Islamic extremism.

If we look at the Islamist mobilization in the Middle East, Singerman argues that because of the absence of political participation that stemmed from repression, people were organized alternatively in informal networks. (Singerman, 2004). Informality had been in the foreground for Islamist movements in order to struggle against incumbent regimes for years. In the same vein, Wiktorowicz depicts the Islamist movements as innovative because of their utilization of informal and less visible forms to mobilize their supporters. They also adopted this method, as in the example of Al Qaeda. Rather than organizational dictates, they accepted the wider Salafi method of religious interpretations. (Wiktorowicz, 2004).

Also, it was argued that socioeconomic factors, cultural imperialism, authoritarian rule, lack of political access, and the crisis environment were the sources of Islamic mobilization. In the structure of current Islamic extremist groups, each of these features can be identified and the question I would like to address is why they were successful against the incumbent regimes in Iraq and Syria.

I would argue that the growing strength of Islamic extremist groups was based on their mobilization capacity that fused social assistance and violence (armed struggle).



Although violence already had been used by some groups, the new thing was the incorporation of social assistance into their struggle more comprehensively and the strategic use of violence which was absent in the old groups. Now it was used by the new ones and these are the crucial factors that enabled them to mobilize the public when the regimes in Iraq and Syria had failed in the mobilization of their citizens.

For example, if we look at the Islamic groups that didn't adopt violence and the armed struggle, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt currently and, for a particular time, the Islamic Salvation Front<sup>17</sup>, they implemented policies through social assistance and politics to get supporters and mobilize society. However, because of their lack of any means of self-defense when faced with violence, they were crushed by the junta regimes even if they had been successful in mobilization and creating a social base.

On the other hand, one of the early Islamic extremist groups, the Algerian GIA<sup>18</sup>, was successful at a particular time from the perspective of using violence. But the exclusivist type of organizational structure adopted by the group, even if it provided some benefits since it was said to, “solidify the cohesion of their members and minimize the defections” (Hafez, 2004), it also prevented the group from addressing a wider social base as the political Islamist groups were able to do. More importantly, the disproportionate use of violence turned to be an uncontrolled force eventually (Mandaville, 2014) that disturbed society and the public became deeply concerned about that.

On the contrary, one of the other early extremist groups that came close to integrating violence and social services in the public sense was the Egyptian Gama al-Islamiyyah.<sup>19</sup> “The Gama’a organized social welfare services that operated out of movements mosques to help impoverished communities... (Hafez and Wiktorowicz, p77, 2004). Also, in the use of violence, they targeted strategic points; however, as in the case of the GIA, they started to lose their social base due to excessive violence that

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<sup>17</sup> The Islamic Salvation Front was an Islamist political party in Algeria.

<sup>18</sup> Armed Islamic Group of Algeria, it was an Islamic extremist group that was operating during the civil war in Algeria.

<sup>19</sup> Gama'a al-Islamiyyah (Islamic Group) was an extremist group that was influential in Egypt in the 1990s

targeted civilians. For example, Kepel (2003) argues that the group's use of violence provoked a reaction from the local population "whose income depended largely on tourism and ... preventing further Jihadist mobilization in the rural areas". On the other hand, a power vacuum that was present in Algeria and today can be noticed in Iraq and Syria, was not prevalent in Egypt and faced with heavy state repression, the group would collapse.

It should be noted that groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah used the same strategy which combined violence and social assistance and they were successful. However, in the literature, they were mostly identified as political Islamist groups as opposed to extremist groups due to their political engagement.

With the rise of ISIS, and in the example of Al-Nusra and other smaller groups in Syria, the two things, strategic violence, and social services have been incorporated very successfully in broader terms and this paved the way for getting support and having mobilization power. For instances, Turner argues that (2015) the " ... very individuals who shunned the approach of Hamas and the Brotherhood to function politically and provide a social function are the same jihadists now advocating precisely this tactic". Zimmerman (2019) argues that current Islamic extremist groups build relations with local Sunni communities "by providing them with security, justice, basic goods, or service ..." Fromson and Simon (2015) argues that ISIS's legitimacy stems from providing (social) services.

Parallel with this issue Kalyvas argues that "...even if ideology is necessary in producing popular support and mobilization, it is never sufficient...". He stressed the organizational dexterity of the groups which provided social assistance, security, and other products rather than ideological commands and as a result of this organizational accomplishment, they gained popular consent and collaboration (what is often described as "support") "which is the outcome of the organizational ability to perform these tasks" (Kalyvas, 2015).

This situation can be seen in the current extremist groups' organizational framework that provides them with the means of acquiring social support. For example, about the increasing number of people joining the Islamist groups in the Syrian civil war,

(Mironova, Whitt and Mrie, 2014) argue that because of the better organization and capabilities of those groups, fighters prefer to join them rather than ideological affiliates.

On the other hand, besides social assistance, the extensive but strategic use of violence as in the example of ISIS provided supporters and mobilization of the public. It was argued by Hegghammer (2006) that with the Iraq war “so-called “strategic studies” have been significantly developed as a distinct genre in the jihadist literature”. He indicated that in contrast to the other methods, in this new era groups started to try “the best possible military strategy to defeat the enemy”. On the other hand, Abu Bakr al-Naji who was the writer of the influential book *Management of Savagery* (2004), proposed a roadmap for the jihadist groups in terms of how they should use violence strategically rather than an all-out war. As argued by Ulutas and other scholars, it can be seen that later ISIS would implement his ideas about the strategic use of violence (Ulutas, 2016).

#### ***4.7. ISIS in Iraq***

The Algerian GIA and Egyptian Gama lost the support that they had acquired from their social base because of their absolute violence that promised nothing and their lack of mobilization power. In order to avoid the same problem, at the start, ISIS (JTWJ) tried to create a strong social base to mobilize the public. (Stenersen, 2017). However, Al Zarqawi's brutal methods which were used against Shias to mobilize the public, especially Sunnis, led to the loss of the group's social base. For example, Ayman al-Zawahiri<sup>20</sup> was critical of Zarqawi's methods, “observing that without popular support the group could not succeed” (Turner, 2015).

As in the example of the Sahwa movement which was formed of Sunni tribes and supported by the US, they were effective and successful for a particular time in combatting ISIS. From the perspective of highlighting the importance of social

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<sup>20</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri was the deputy of Osama bin Laden at that time now he became the leader of the Al-Qaeda

support, it was a significant example, because they were the same community that ISIS claimed to represent.

However, the decision to pullout US troops from Iraq led to weakened Sahwa efforts (Benraad, 2011). In the ongoing process, sec-based policies implemented by prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's Shia-led central government and their hesitation toward the “Sunni” Sahwa movement caused the weakening of and disenchantment with Sahwa and the reappearance of ISIS by exploiting existing social and political divisions (Lister, 2014).

The question which should be asked is how ISIS acquired much more social support again after 2009-2010 to mobilize the public. Whiteside argues that ISIS's comeback in 2010 was because they were able to “regain a base of political support from the Sunni community” (Whiteside, 2016). For example, veteran Iraqi pollster Muniqth M. Dagherl (2015) shows in his research how ISIS won hearts and minds and increased their support among public.

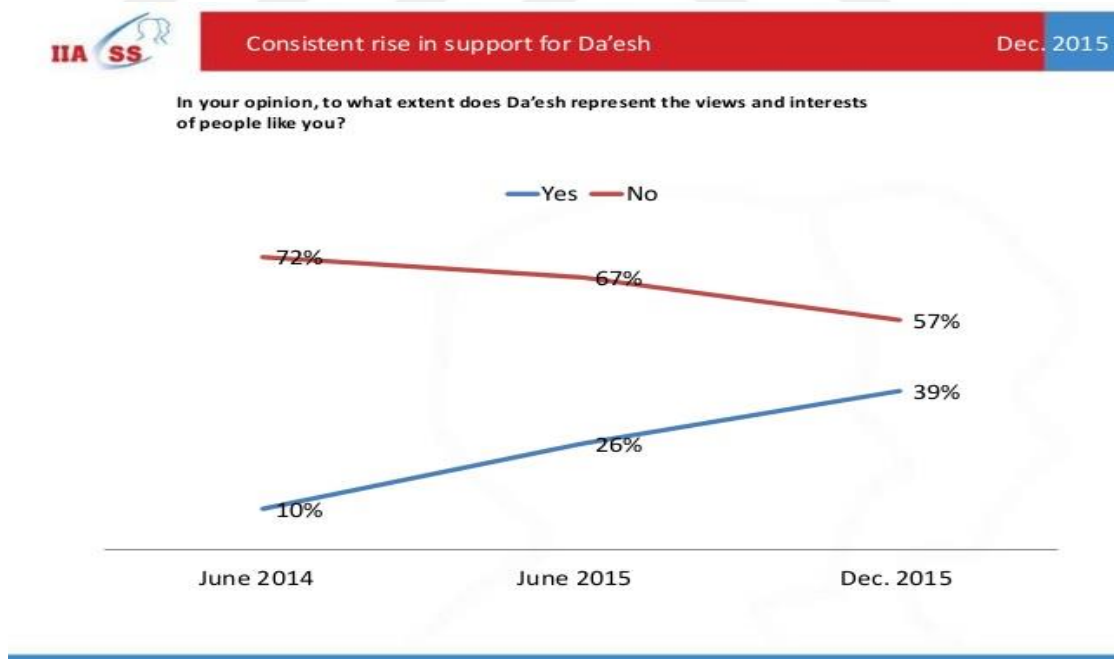


Figure 1: Increasing social support of ISIS between the 2014-2015 (Source: Muniqth M.Dagger, 2015)

I want to give an example from Kepel's book, *Jihad: Trail of Political Islam*, (2006) for further comparison purposes. When Kepel examined the success of Ayatollah Khomeini by comparing him with Qutb and Mawdudi, he argued that the ability of Khomeini to mobilize all sections of the social classes (oppressed class and middle class, clergy, seculars, etc.) brought him into the forefront and because all of the classes were included, the Islamic Revolution was victorious in Iran. In the same vein, if we look at the mobilization power of ISIS, especially in Iraq after 2009-2010, it can be seen that they reached every segment of the Sunni community. For the oppressed class and people who lived in poor conditions, they used the power of money to recruit them. For example, “by mid-2010, ISI was offering larger salaries than the government and recruiting Sahwa members” (Lister, 2014). Also, Stern (2016) gives an example from the local recruits of ISIS and how the group was able to give the “highest paying-job... physical protection, free housing...” to the people.

On the other hand, besides financial power, there were two further types of method that ISIS used, violence or oppression and negotiation. For the sect-based ex-Baath officers, ISIS used the collaboration method by giving important positions to them in the movement. Fromson and Simon (2015) argue that groups that were inclined to a sect-based understanding, mostly consisting of the ex- Baathists started to collaborate with ISIS and “have signed on as junior partners... and "this convergence, over time, has been built into the ISIS hierarchy”. On the other hand, after bad relations with the Sunni tribes as in the example of the Sahwa movement, ISIS started to carry out different strategies based on offering wealth and power, and the organization “collects their bayats (oaths) and in most areas left them alone if they are loyal to ISIS.” (Kavalek, 2015).

For the clergymen, there was a consensus that if they accepted their version of Islam and propagated it, they would be tolerated, but if they did the opposite, they had to be exiled. As can be seen, whether with oppression or negotiation, ISIS could mobilize the Sunni people who lived in Iraq and to some extent in Syria. It should be noted here that sect-based discourse was important in this mobilization, as well. However, I believe that the ability to reach the different segments of the social classes in the Sunni community and unify it was the key reason for their successful mobilization process, as showed in the figure 1.

Besides this social support, their strategies that were related to the use of violence were important with regard to mobilizing the public. The assassination of important Sahwa and tribal leaders and army officers were important to show the public how powerful and well-organized they were. Also, the extensive but strategic use of violence that they exercised through the media apparatuses spread substantial fear among the people who were against ISIS and they avoided opposing them. For example, as argued by the people, the Mosul battle was one of the results of this understanding that led to of the Iraqi army escaping from the Mosul without a fight.

The ISIS policy that aimed to liberate the prisons was important with regard to the use of strategic violence. For example, in July 2012, ISIS started an operation entitled “Breaking Down the walls” with the purpose of freeing the prisoners (Gerges, 2016) and they succeeded in most of the operation. All of these strategic actions contributed to ISIS’s capacity to mobilize the public. Thanks to these actions, they acquired a strong image in the eyes of the people and this simplified the task of getting supporters and mobilizing them.

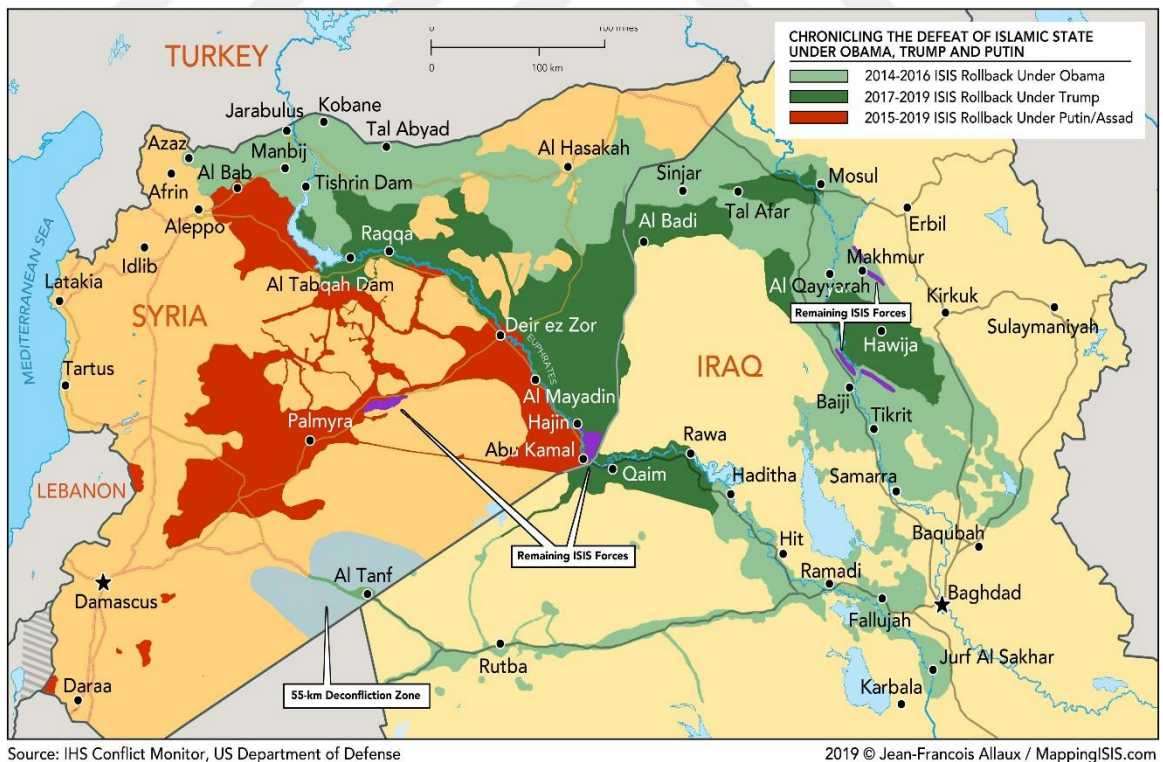


Figure 2: Changes of ISIS influence between 2014-2019 (Source: IHS Conflict Monitor as cited in Mapping ISIS, 2019)

#### ***4.8. The Syrian Groups***

During the course of the Syrian civil war jihadist groups that arose in the country tried to adopt similar tactics. In contrast to Iraq, in Syria, the “jihadist militancy had a well-established, though complex, history in Syria prior to the outbreak of protest in early 2011”(Lister, 2016). However, despite their experience in the past decades, they couldn’t mobilize a substantial part of the public and they stayed isolated and were brutally repressed by the regime. The situation started to change with the Arab spring process, when they began to emerge as important actors. The power vacuum, of course, was an important factor in this emergence but it wasn't enough to explain this phenomenon.

If we look at the emergence of Al-Nusra, accepted as the foremost example of a jihadist group in Syria, they attempted to build a social base by providing social assistance to the public (Baczko, Dorronsoro and Quensay, 2018). On the other hand, Lister explains the aims of the group in this way; “The priority is to establish deep ties with local communities ...and acting as a social movement rather than solely a military...(Lister, 2016). The group did not have as many foreign fighters as ISIS and also they didn't accept foreign fighters at the start of the war in order to show that they were no different from their fellow countrymen.

Hassan (2013) shows how the jihadist groups in Syria, especially Al-Nusra, “started to conquer hearts” and quotes from Abu Muhammed Al Joulani, who is the leader of the group. Joulani told his fighters that “Day after day, you're getting closer to the people after you have conquered their hearts and become trusted by them.” For example, after Al-Nusra was designated as a terrorist organization, people started to chant “We are all Al-Nusra” in the protests. (2012, France24).

On the other hand, other groups that are identified as jihadist, such as Kataib Ahrar al-Sham, Suqor al-Izz, Syrian Islamic Front (an umbrella organization that included different groups), used the same methods, which prioritized social assistance as a way to reach the public and to win their hearts in order to mobilize them. Lister (2016) gives examples of how the policies of extremist groups (Al-Nusra &Ahrar al-Sham) toward the public were implemented very successfully. For instance, Al Nusra’s and

Ahrar al-Sham's efforts concerning the distribution of public goods and the provision of security were the factors that increased the group's engagement with society and constituted the social base.

In the case of violence, however, they were not as effective as ISIS strategically. The fragmentary nature of the civil war was an important factor in this because there were hundreds of groups which were fighting each other and there wasn't a strong united opposition. However, if we look at the trajectory of the Syrian civil war, it can be seen that Islamist groups, especially extremists, gradually dominated the field. They were successful at the battleground and it can be seen that these groups superseded the FSA units. Their capability to perform strategic operations against regime units was one of the factors that thrust them into a leadership role.

For example, the coalition that was formed of Islamic groups, especially the ones that were known to be extremists, captured Idlib in 2015, which is one of the biggest cities in Syria. On the other hand, the use of social media effectively, as in the example of ISIS, was important for those groups in terms of showing how they were able to carry out strategic operations. Sharing operation scenes and videos on social media, gave a favourable impression to people and brought support to the groups in terms of money and manpower.

To sum up, when Whiteside compares Mao's thoughts about warfare and ISIS's strategies, he cites from Mao, that "... the victory was only possible once the population is mobilized to support the guerillas" (Whiteside, 2016). I would suggest that the process mentioned by Whiteside was successful for a particular time for Iraq and Syria, if we accept that ISIS and the Syrian extremist groups were guerillas. Also, besides this view, the combination of social services and violence paved the way for groups to act like a state in many areas in Iraq and Syria for a particular time. In addition to this, increasing territorial control, which will be mentioned below came to resemble a full state, holding territory and providing security and social services.



#### *4.9. Increasing Territorial Control and Discourse*

On the other hand, another important feature that was adopted by the groups and caused greater mobilization power was the increase in territorial control. Lia argues that “If one should point out a watershed in the history of jihadi proto-states, it must be 2011 when the Arab Spring revolutions unsettled state authorities in the region” (Lia, 2015). The power vacuum was a crucially important factor in this situation and it ensured that the groups had enough free space to enforce their rule. In contrast to the former extremist groups that did not control large, important territories, this situation brought advantages to the groups which were located in Iraq and Syria. In the areas they governed, they were able to mobilize their fighters and they got support from the public by providing social assistance and security to the local population.

For example, Whiteside argues that “Islamic State ability to control territory after 2010 facilitated the mobilization of supporters to its cause” (Whiteside, 2016) The same happened in Syria and this situation also enabled them to control significant resources, such as oil, infrastructure, etc. In a way it can be argued that, the success of combining violence and social assistance was actually based on the increasing territorial control of the groups.

The discourse that the extremist groups adopted was an important factor in mobilizing the people and surpassing nationalism and political Islam. They used more transnational discourse by referring to Islam, the understanding of ummah, and they were able to gain support from different parts of the world in terms of money and manpower. With the hybridization process argued by Heghammer (2009), this situation accelerated due to almost every extremist group's having a discourse that included transnational images. Both in Iraq and Syria, despite the context of conflict which was localized in those territories, the groups used to continue their transnational discourse which indicated that they were part of the ummah. This was the case for ISIS and, the small Islamic extremist groups in Syria also applied this tactic and they were able to get support in terms of foreign fighters and foreign aid.

With the collapse of Pan-Arabism, the same transnational discourse which existed in Nasser's period can't be found in the Arab world today. The Political Arabism

predominated over the Arab states and constricted them into a particular territorial entity. On the other hand, concerning the reason for the extremists surpassing political Islamist groups, Roy (1994) proposes the following. He argues that political Islam had failed and this failure led to divisions. On the one hand, Islamist groups had become nationalized, on the other, a new group emerged which he called the “new fundamentalists”, which embraced jihadism and fundamentalism.

Roy's argument suggested that because of the Islamist group's failure to find new solutions for the issue of government and their nationalization process, they lost support. Here, the important thing was the nationalization of the Islamist groups. The main discourse of these groups was based on the idea of being “transnational”. But when they engaged with nation-states, they were affected by them. For the Arabs, the form of nationalism is state-nationalism, not Arab nationalism. If we look at these groups, they did not embrace Arab nationalism, they were mostly more associated with state-nationalism.

This atmosphere mainly benefited the Islamic extremist groups. When the Islamist groups became stuck in a nationalist discourse and couldn't go beyond it, extremists would take the lead in terms of addressing the whole Muslim community.

#### ***4.10. Conclusion: The Weaknesses of Arab nationalism***

The reasons for the rise of Islamic extremism have been mentioned in the literature review. Here, in contrast to those reasons, I would suggest that the assumptions concerning the causes of extremism proposed by Dekmejian are directly related to the problems of Arab nationalism.

With regard to the question of why fundamentalism has arisen, some categories have been suggested by Dekmejian. According to these categories, identity crisis, legitimacy crisis, misrule/coercion, class conflict, military impotence and culture crisis have an important role in the rise of extremism (Dekmejian, 1995). I would argue that apart from the cultural crisis and class conflict, the others can be identified as problems of Arab nationalism. Here the term Arab nationalism will be used as an umbrella concept that includes different types such as Political Arabism, state nationalism.

A crisis of identity can be observed in the Arab states. First of all, there is the question of whether people belong to a general Arab nation or are citizens of particular Arab states. Are they Iraqi and Syrian, are their states artificial or do they belong to a broader Arab nation? If we look at the history of Arab politics, even in the time of Nasser, which is accepted as the apex of Pan-Arabism, there were disputes among Arab states concerning the claim that the Arabs had to be unified. In the ongoing process, the absence of common Arab policies toward external and internal threats demonstrated the failure of the Pan-Arab identity (Kramer, 1993). The understanding of belonging to a state rather than *qavmiyyah*, state nationalism, came into prominence after the death of Pan-Arabism; however, with the rise of authoritarian regimes it turned into a clan and tribal type of government. Having a tribal or sect-based kinships outweighed the other factors.

The uncertain role of Islam in the Arab identity (some saw it as a cultural value, some as a determining factor for the Arab identity) intensified the identity crisis. With the rise of Islamic politics, people questioned the role of Islam in their countries. If we look at Iraq and Syria in the light of this explanation, they match these conditions. In Syria, there was the experience of unity with Egypt, which was important in terms of belonging to the wider Arab nation but which ultimately failed.

Iraq had been trying to form a unified Arab identity under the rule of King Faisal 1<sup>st</sup> in the interwar period; however, this didn't succeed either. With the ascent of neo-Baathists in Iraq and Syria, the discourse that addressed the broader Arab nation lost importance and they preferred to create an identity that favoured state nationalism. However, in this long process tribal, sect-based and kinship affiliations became more important. On the other hand, the role of Islam in Iraq and Syria was under intense pressure. For example, as argued by Khaddour, (2019). “The Syrian regime (both Hafez and Bashar Assad) has viewed Islam primarily as a security matter”. Regimes were trying to keep Islam under their control, they made some “reforms” or tried to re-Islamize the society but those efforts weren't enough to prevent the increasing role of Islam.

Under these complex conditions, Islamic extremists were able to find fertile ground for themselves by referring to the failure of the different components of the Arab

identity. They adopted a more transnational but a kind of inclusive understanding of national identity which was localized in particular regions, like just operating in Syria. Currently, related to the failure of the Arab and state-identity process, Drevon (2017) argues that the "...national jihadi project that opposes transnational violence while striving to be embedded in its local constituency is likely to remain".

The crisis of legitimacy was another important problem for Arab nationalism. If we look at Arab politics, the defenders of Pan-Arabism like Nasser and the Baath Party came to power by means of coups rather than elections. There were elections, but they were rigged. This situation damaged their legitimacy in the eyes of the public, especially Islamists. On the other hand, it gave the perception to extremists that if the same method was used, i.e. violence, they would be successful, because of the impossibility of coming to power through the normal political process.

In the same vein, Saddam and Assad's regimes were not legitimate and although they claimed that they were nationalists, as argued above, nationalism was like a tool in their hands. Their legitimacy was not based on public support, it was based on personal rule, violence, and oppression. For example, in Iraq in the 1990s "nationalism was severely weakened because there was not nation, there was a person(Saddam)... there was no sense of nationalism" (Haddad, 2014). When Saddam fell and Assad died, the same crisis of legitimacy would continue with the Shias in Iraq and Bashar Assad in Syria. Sunnis were excluded from the political process in Iraq and, in Syria, the status-quo continued with Bashar.

In this problematic environment, from the perspective of extremists, they had to show the people that the incumbent regimes were not legitimate because their power wasn't based on public support and sharia rules. Based on this argument, I would argue that they were able to get supporters who wanted to change something due to the failure of the political process in those countries.

On the other hand, related to the crisis of legitimacy, misrule and coercion were some of the adverse features of Arab nationalism that paved the way for Islamic extremism. The heavy repression against the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups in the Nasser period and, in the same way, in Iraq and Syria the brutal methods used by

the regimes led to the marginalization of Islamic opposition and other forces. Banning and preventing Islamic opposition from the political sphere led to the organization of informal and underground groups. Channeling Islamic opposition into the political arena could be beneficial; however, the use of repressive acts caused the Islamists to adopt more extremist methods and they adopted the armed struggle to realize their dreams.

With regard to military impotence, the best example would be the Iraqi and the Syrian Armies. In the new period that started in 1967, there were no important coup attempts; however, the army started being taken over by Baathists in both countries. People close to the party were placed in important command echelons. Recruitment and appointments started to be made according to kinship and clan ties rather than merit. For example, in Syria, Van Dam (1981) explains how the Baathists, especially Alawites, started to gradually gain important positions with the ascent of Hafez Assad. In the same vein, in Iraq, with the Baathification policy, they firstly took control of the army to get crucial positions and defend the core of the regime.

However, during that period there was no extremist threat (except for a revolt in Syria in 1978) against these regimes, it would mostly occur during the period after the Arab Spring. In Iraq, the situation was reversed under the rule of Nouri al-Maliki, since the army started to become corrupted because of the recruitment policy and appointments which prioritized the Shias. The most well-known example was the Mosul battle, where despite having superiority in terms of numbers and equipment, the Iraqi army was defeated by ISIS due to the corruption of the army (Cockburn, 2015).

However, Syria's situation was different. Throughout the civil war that started in 2011, the core of the Army stayed loyal to the regime. However, the fact that the Army was sect-based and prioritized the regime rather than national concerns gave extremist groups the opportunity to make propaganda, since they depicted the army as the army of the Alawites or Shias.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although the groups like Islamic State, Al-Nusra (now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) and others have flourished dramatically in Iraq and Syria, their influence seems to have vanished today. ISIS lost a large part of its power due to its unprecedented violence, the coalition led by the U.S and the efforts of popular mobilization forces. The group's ability to gain support from different parts of the Sunni community was destroyed. However, I think it is too soon to be able to state with any certainty that ISIS will never surface again. For example, Rolbiecki demonstrated that between 2018 and 2019 ISIS undertook the nearly 3000 attacks and almost 2/3 were in Iraq and Syria (Rolbiecki, 2019).

On the other hand, the protests which started in Iraq which were caused by the bad conditions in the country and Iranian pressure can be viewed as potential tools for manipulation by the remnants of ISIS, although there is a discourse that emphasizes an Iraqi identity first. The same happened in 2011-2012 during the days of the Arab Spring, when, because of the protests, everyone was expecting a national awakening to occur. The result, however, was the rise of ISIS. Today, for instance, many commanders of popular mobilization forces have been beaten or killed during the protests and this situation poses this question; are ISIS supporters disguising themselves as protesters and infiltrating the protests?

Whether this situation would lead to a negative impact on the group or not, it is important to stress that while the group lost its leader two times (Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi) this situation didn't affect the rise of the group. Also, they are experienced and gained deeply rooted social networks throughout the years and I would argue that this situation can't be easily changed.

The protests in Iraq can mark a new phrase for the country, as the Iraqi identity is coming to the forefront rather than other affiliations. However, there are two fundamental issues that the government should solve. As has been true in Iraqi history, the lack of inclusive national identity policies could lead to the rise of radical groups and particular clans. (Era of Saddam, Tikritis). In the short term, it would not be easy to overcome this problem. The reason is that for a phenomenon like broad-based

inclusive nationalism to emerge, strong institutions and common ground are required. The process which started with Saddam's Baathification policy, continued with Maliki's sectarian politics and resulted in ISIS's millenarian worldview prevented the preconditions of that type of development from emerging. What Iraq needs is a social contract that must be based on Iraqi identity; however, the question is which things would be included in this new identity? Should it be more religious-based nationalism or more secular? In the near future, what can Iraqi nationalism turn out to be?

These are hard questions to answer; however, I would suggest that if a nationalist movement occurs it can be more secular because of the country's problems emanating from religious issues. Also, new research suggests that in the Arab countries people "people have turned their backs on religion" (BBC and Arab Barometer, 2019) and Iraq is one of these countries.

However, this type of nationalism can lead to conflict. Based on the problematic place of Islam in the public sphere, existing disagreements could be inflamed and turned into a potential recruitment tool in the hands of extremist groups against the advocates of secularism as before. Also, the role of the established Shia authority in Iraq is important and critical in the new era independently from politics, in terms of which direction Iraqi nationalism would evolve. The question is whether they would accept a secular-based nationalism or would they demand more a religious-based nationalism? Another question that should be asked is whether nationalism will be a real remedy? Are there any other possible ideologies where the different parts of Iraq can live? Democracy can be a solution but if we look at the history of Iraq, the process started by the U.S invasion with the claim of bringing democracy has failed. Sectarian and ethnic cleavages in the country were always an obstacle to democracy in this period because representation was very limited for the minorities. The majority was always dominant and didn't want to share its power and repressed others. For the fragmented nature of Iraq, imposing the democracy can be tough in the future but if the representation issue is resolved and a strong constitution is made the situation may differ.

The second problem Iraq should immediately address is social conditions in the country. One of the main discourses of the protests was about unemployment, job

opportunities, and salaries. As mentioned in section three, ISIS succeeded in penetrating the social sphere to get supporters by giving high salaries and providing job opportunities. Therefore, if these bad economic conditions continue, this could provide an opportunity for ISIS to reappear.

In Syria, as in Iraq, ISIS lost its extensive power and other groups (HTS, Ahrar-al-Sham) are no longer as powerful as they were at the start of the civil war. There is just one stronghold left, Idlib, for the HTS and other jihadists. Except for the failure of ISIS, I would argue that the Syrian jihadist groups' failure was not as clear as in the case of ISIS. For example, I would suggest that their power hasn't been completely eliminated and that they have been able to maintain their social base. As mentioned in chapter three, the local populations started to accept their position due to their strenuous efforts. The group's loss of power was mostly caused by some external factors, which the U.S, Iran, and Russia had a substantial share in. No movement grew from the Sunni community to struggle against these groups and this is important because when they don't lose their social base it can give them a chance to flourish again in the future.

The period between 1976-1982 can provide a clue about this issue. The heavy repression of extremist groups by the regime forces (Lefevre, 2013) seemed to be successful at that time; however, as they weren't defeated by the Sunni community it provided opportunities for them to maintain their social base among the public. For example, the fact that at the start of the Arab Spring Assad freed the prisoners who were blamed for possessing extremist views to change the nature of the protests is widely discussed and this situation contributed to the rise of extremism. Even if this situation were correct, it indicates how powerful their social base was among the public, not all around the country but in particular places due to their good organization and success in a very short time.

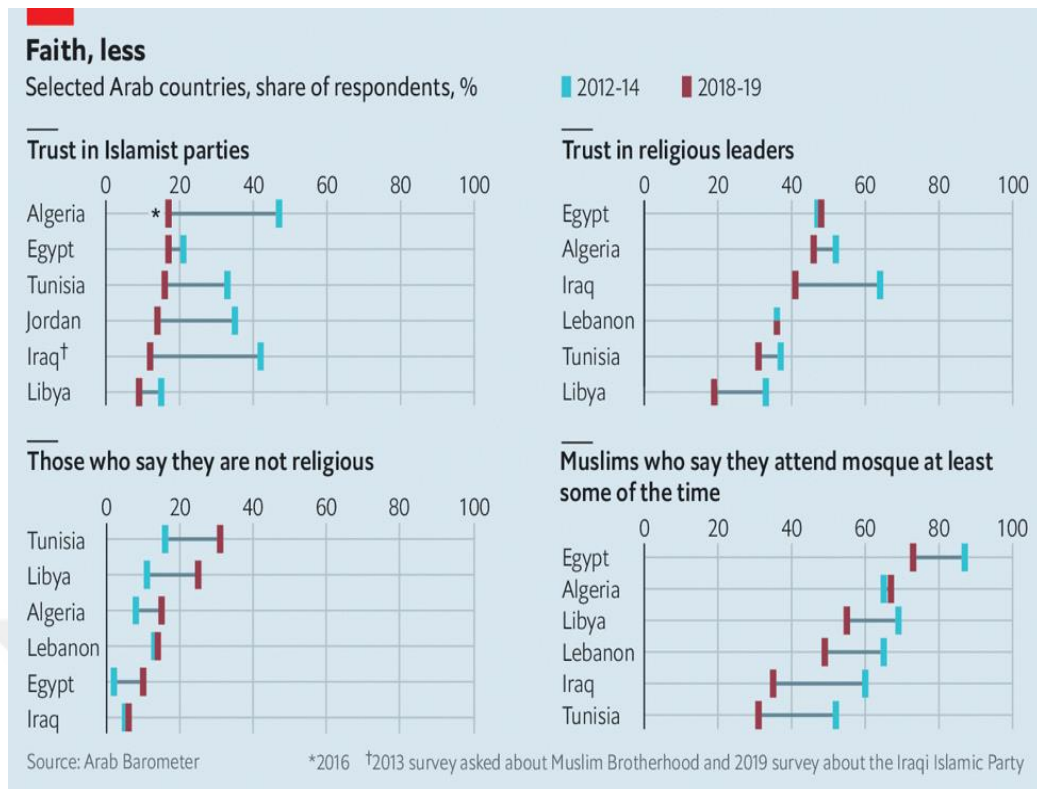
Now, differently from the old times, they are more well-established thanks to the development of transportation and communication tools. As argued by Akdedian (2019) "... throughout the conflict, religious networks have gained an unprecedented level of public presence and influence in everyday life through their ability to meet social and humanitarian needs within localities" On the other hand, Khaddour (2019)



argues that because of the influence of radicalization in the Syrian civil war it could pave the way for a new generation who have adopted radical thoughts.

The situation in Syria seems to be more complicated than Iraq; the war didn't finish and Assad couldn't be toppled. However, in the short term the decision of the U.S to pull out from Syria, Turkish efforts to create a buffer zone and the recapturing of almost all the regions which were lost by the Syrian army except Idlib, could signal that the end of the war is imminent. However, a more problematic issue than the end of the war is what will the new Syria be like? How will the people unite under a common Syrian identity which has already been weak for years?

One of the methods followed by the regime is that when recapturing territories the Syrian government is using "local clerics to reassert its authority" (Al-Saidawi, 2019) This step can be an indicator of the fact that in the new period Islam will be used as a catalyst to bond the public; however, the more likely outcome is that it will be used as an instrument in the hands of the regime as it has been previously. Also, there have been many examples of ever since the period of Assad the father, of how the regime has used and negotiated with particular religious officials by giving them some autonomy in order to monitor society better. Another important point is that throughout the last decade trust to Islamic principles has declined among the Arab countries as shown in figure 3. For this thesis Iraq is important but Syria can be also added this category.



The Economist

Figure 3: Survey results about the religious topics in the Arab world (Source: The Economist, 2019)

The situation is more like the one depicted by Brown (2017) “Arab regimes view religion as a battleground to counter violent extremism and state religious institutions as a weapon they can employ”. On the other hand, for example, the process of reconstruction in Syria can provide a clue about the future of the country. Daher (2019) argues that “...Assad’s primary aim has not been to reverse the ravages of war. Instead, his regime has designed reconstruction to reward the loyalty of its network”. This means that after the war the same exclusive situation would persist, i.e. a lack of inclusive politics. To blacklist between nearly 1.5-3 million people due to their opposition to the regime and threaten them with arrest if they return to Syria clearly shows the nature of the regime.

Also, the return of locals to particular regions was limited or in some cases was prohibited and as in the case of Zabadani, Aleppo and the suburbs of Damascus, when these areas were recaptured by the regime forces, the population of these areas was in some way forced to change. It can clearly be seen that “the Assad regime is preparing

the groundwork to bar the return of, or expel, populations that participated in the uprising against its rule” (El Hariri, 2019). The clear situation is that if Assad continues to stay in power, finding a solution would be a very tough issue.

With regard to the question of which direction Syrian identity/nationalism could take, I would argue that contrary to Iraq, religious sentiments can be included in it. This is because whereas in Iraq, there just ISIS encapsulated Islamic extremism, in Syria there were different groups operating independently of ISIS and these groups had well established social networks and affected the people's worldview, especially young people. This situation would affect the future political landscape of Syria and Islam's role in the country has already been a point of conflict for decades. Just like Iraq, Syria needs a new social contract that would provide a more inclusive national identity. If it isn't reached, it would always be a potential reason for the strengthening of extremist groups. As I stressed above for Iraq, nationalism isn't the only possible solution with its variations. The same can be true for Syria, democracy may replace in the political arena of Syria, however, as in the case of Iraq, the fragmented nature of Syria and lack of representation that continued throughout the decades will not easily be changed. They need a strong constitution that will guarantee the rights of all different parts and provide equal representation in order to the emergence of democracy.

Lastly, I would like to discuss the question of whether in the next decades there is any possibility of a Pan-Arabist ideology being revived. The answer to this question can be quite contradictory. On the one hand, the weakness of particular states' nationalisms which couldn't bond their nations together can be thought of as a source of a new Pan-Arabist revival. On the other hand, the fractured situation of the Arab world with poor conditions in terms of migration, the rate of youth unemployment and civil wars can be obstacles preventing the revival of such an ideology. However, it is also possible that there could be a resurgence of a Pan-Arabist ideology, promising solutions to all the problems of the Arabs.

Also, some may argue that the concept of the nation-state is established in the region despite its poor condition. For example, it was argued that “... Arab borders have proven more resilient than many borders in the Balkans, East Africa, or Southeast Asia, which have seen the creation of new states or the transformation of old ones”

(Cammack vd. 2017). The reality of the Arab nation-states may not be easily broken down if the current understanding of the nation-state in the world also survives.



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