



Regional Responses To The Rise Of ISIS

By: **Curtis Ryan**

Abstract

Many states in the Middle East claim to be waging determined war against ISIS. But no one, save the Kurds, seems to be doing so. Threatening as it is, ISIS is not the top priority of any member of the coalition arrayed against it. Regional responses to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, have varied depending on regime perceptions of threat, not only from ISIS itself, but also from other potential rivals, challengers, or enemies. Despite the jihadi group's extensive use of violence in Syria and Iraq and its claims of responsibility for bombings and attacks in Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen -- as well as France in mid-November -- it was not necessarily the top security priority for any of these states.

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Farashin Mehriva, 21, from the Women's Protection Unit of the Syrian Kurdish forces fighting ISIS.

NEWSHA TAVAKOLIAN/POLARIS

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Many states in the Middle East claim to be waging determined war against ISIS. But no one, save the Kurds, seems to be doing so. Threatening as it is, ISIS is not the top priority of any member of the coalition arrayed against it.

Regional responses to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, have varied depending on regime perceptions of threat, not only from ISIS itself, but also from other potential rivals, challengers or enemies. Despite the jihadi group's extensive use of violence in Syria and Iraq and its claims of responsibility for bombings and attacks in Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen—as well as France in mid-November—it was not necessarily the top security priority for any of these states. And this level of priority, in part, explains the seemingly scattered, incoherent and decidedly disparate responses to ISIS, even as the organization expanded its territorial control in 2014 and into the next year, before losing some ground in the later months of 2015.

Within the discipline of international relations, ISIS generally fits the mold of a non-state actor. It is a jihadi organization with affiliates in several countries, but which emerged from a marriage of previously opposed elements in Iraq—al-Qaeda in Iraq, on the one hand, and security and intelligence personnel from the toppled Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, on the other. But when ISIS declared itself a revived caliphate, and took control of Mosul and other cities, towns and territories, it started to look more like the state that it aspired to be. Those rapid conquests triggered considerable alarm across the region, for ISIS suddenly seemed like a contender for real power. Yet the bloody rise of ISIS was but the latest in a series of jolts to the regional system. And the timing of these events matters in understanding the regional responses.

A Series of Jolts

The ill-fated US invasion of Iraq in 2003 delivered a shock to the region, leading to a radical rise in terrorism, and reinvigorating al-Qaeda and its ilk. The unintended, yet all too predictable, effects of the US invasion did not end there, however. The destruction of Iraq also enabled the continuing rise to regional prominence and the greater foreign policy activism of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a state run largely by Shi'i Muslim clerics and whose rival states mostly identify with Sunni Islam. Iran's ascent fed the existing narrative of many Sunni Islamist organizations, and especially jihadi ones, that the region was embroiled in a struggle for control and survival between the two main branches of Islam. Of the states in the region, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been particularly guilty of aiding and abetting this sectarian narrative, actively encouraging prejudice when it favors them, but also vocally decrying the other for sowing this same inter-communal distrust.

In 2011, the region was shaken to its roots again. This time, the challenges came from below, in the form of the populist pro-democracy movements across the Arab world. After initial successes, however, and unfortunately for the region's many grassroots activists, reactionary forces subsequently came to

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dominate and destabilize regional politics still further. The uprisings took a dark turn toward civil war, insurgency and resurgent authoritarianism, despite the efforts of millions of Arab citizens to the contrary. When ISIS emerged, ostensibly challenging all states in the region, it provided an excuse for already security-obsessed regimes to hunker down still more, further damaging the democratic goals of the movements of 2011. The regimes, in short, were already in the midst of reestablishing themselves.

But ISIS also emerged at a moment in regional international relations that has been described as a new Middle East cold war, not in the sense of the global Cold War that ran roughly from 1945 to 1990, but more akin to an earlier regional rift known as the Arab cold war. Like the current version, the earlier conflict saw authoritarian regimes wrestle with each other to remain in power and to dominate the internal affairs (and even regime types) of their neighbors. The earlier version, associated with Egyptian political ascendancy under Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s, coalesced around two struggles—one between nominally leftist military-backed republics and conservative hereditary monarchies, and a second among the radical republics themselves (often taking on Nasserist versus Baathist dimensions).

Today's regional cold war has many similarities to the past. In both eras, an alignment of conservative monarchies banded together to fend off challenges to the rule of royal families. In both eras, the struggles took place within the weakest states, including in the form of military interventions and civil wars and backing alternative local contenders for power from Syria to Yemen. In the current version, however, there is no coalition of radical republics and no equivalent to the figure of Nasser, for that matter. The closest approximation might be the self-styled "axis of resistance" that links Iran and Assad's Syria to Lebanese Hizballah and (at least at one time) Hamas. But each of these actors is itself a polarizing force for much of the rest of the region. And also unlike the earlier era, this time there are multiple jihadi movements, from al-Qaeda to ISIS, challenging regimes, states and borders.

The new version also includes a pronounced sectarian dimension. This fact should be seen not so much as a cause in itself, but rather as an element in regional identity politics that major powers—Saudi Arabia and Iran, in particular—have manipulated in order to rouse support for themselves and counter their opponents. Similarly, Islamist movements from the Society of Muslim Brothers on the Sunni side to Lebanese Hizballah on the Shi'i side have also in effect marketed their own material power struggles as ideological and existential. It is into this volatile mix that ISIS expanded, establishing a kind of anti-Westphalian state in parts of both Syria and Iraq.

ISIS, Syria and Iraq

As ISIS emerged, Syria's regime was immersed in war with rebel factions, but the civil war had already turned into

something of a multi-sided melee including outside proxies. In that sense, ISIS was but the latest entrant into a war that had enlisted foreign fighters, including Lebanese Hizballah and forces from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. The brutal regime of Bashar al-Asad had survived the war mainly through extensive Iranian and Russian support, yet it seemed paradoxically to value—at least instrumentally

ISIS emerged as Arab regimes were reconsolidating their power after the 2011 uprisings.

and temporarily—the entry of ISIS and other jihadi organizations into the fray. Asad’s forces appeared to prefer attacks on elements of the Free Syrian Army, the set of armed organizations that comprised a diffuse rebel military front, even as ISIS, too, battled rebels it derided as tools of Western imperialism.

The role of jihadi elements in the Syrian civil war—from Ahrar al-Sham to Jabhat al-Nusra to ISIS itself—also buttressed the dictatorship’s overall narrative of a secular state defending itself and the notion of a pluralist Syria against violent and uncompromising Sunni Islamist chauvinism. When Asad originally claimed that the Syrian revolution was a foreign and jihadi conspiracy, it was utterly ludicrous. But as the war dragged on, jihadi elements loomed ever larger on the battlefield. And here, too, the very brutality of both the regime and ISIS each fed the other’s self-image as champion of the Syrian people against a particularly barbaric force. Both were indeed ruthless, but neither could reasonably be seen as defenders of public safety, let alone popular sovereignty or social welfare.

In Iraq, unlike in Syria, the regime was no longer an avowed Baathist state. But the post-invasion Iraqi state remained under construction or reconstruction, and leaders like Nouri al-Maliki had proven to be both authoritarian and sectarian in their modes of operation. Maliki had jealously guarded his personal power for several years, but simultaneously undermined the writ of the state, which became increasingly identified in Iraq as an amalgam of sectarian actors—the government and army included—rather than a set of national institutions. When in 2014 the army yielded town after town and city after city to advancing ISIS forces, it only reinforced perceptions of its frailty and partisan nature. Indeed, to date, the main military successes against ISIS in Iraq have been achieved by Kurdish *peshmergas* and/or Shi’i militias, the latter often with the direct backing of Iranian forces, which now operate relatively openly.

It is the very weakness of the Syrian and Iraqi states vis-à-vis their respective “nations” that has made them vulnerable to the sectarian narrative emanating from embattled grassroots movements, but also from state capitals and the capital of an aspiring state, namely, Raqqa, the center of the ISIS “caliphate.” In 2006 Jordan’s King ‘Abdallah II referred to a “Shiite crescent” stretching from Lebanon across Syria and Iraq to its cusp in Iran. But, as political scientist F. Gregory Gause has argued, the real dynamic is not an arc of Shi’ism or of Iranian power, but rather an arc of weak states that are each prone to manipulation by other states. And at present, these states include regional powers that prefer to hide their own political agendas behind a veneer of sectarianism.

As the Syrian uprising of 2011 turned into a protracted civil war, it was quite complex in real terms—yet like Iraq, the Syrian situation fit into the existing Saudi-Iranian power struggle and the narrative of sectarian conflict that both powers, and indeed many domestic Islamist movements, were already using. Iraq’s “new” military frequently seemed to crumble in the face of the ISIS threat, yielding the field to Kurdish and Shi’i irregulars and Sunni tribes to fight sometimes against ISIS, sometimes against others, but always over the future of the Iraqi state itself.

Responses of Regional Powers

The Syrian civil war seemed to drag in a host of foreign powers, most of whom decried external meddling, even as they attempted to intervene covertly or otherwise to affect the outcome of the war. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran seemed to regard the Syrian war as vital to their own struggle, and backed opposing sides, helping to lead to a relentlessly bloody stalemate. They would reproduce this same disastrous formula as they backed rival Yemeni groups, helping to plunge Yemen, too, into civil war in late 2014. This calculus only makes sense in the context of cold war dynamics—that is, fomenting instability and violence elsewhere in order to preserve power and regime security and survival at home. Yet here, too, security priorities differed. Iran appeared to give pride of place to the war in Syria, with only limited support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen, while a new Saudi regime seemed almost to have panicked, reading in Yemen a far greater role for the Islamic Republic, and hence leading a military intervention that far surpasses what Iran has done.

The focus of Riyadh and Tehran on one another explains at least in part the confused and delayed responses to ISIS. For Iran, the territorial conquests of ISIS took place in largely Sunni Arab or Kurdish parts of Syria and Iraq, but in all cases they interfered in Iran’s self-styled sphere of influence. While the situations in Syria and Iraq were dramatically different, Iran put forces on the ground in both countries to support the regimes against domestic opponents and now also to counter ISIS. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, did not send its own troops into combat and had



Syrians seek refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan, September 17, 2014.

ANDREA BRUCE/NOOR/REDUX

no equivalent ally to Hizballah to back in its stead. It did, however, support various Syrian rebel factions, funnel arms and money into the conflict, and continue to cast Iran—not ISIS—as its main regional opponent. In the aftermath of the Iranian nuclear deal (between Iran and six major powers, including the US), and the Russian airstrikes that commenced in September, that orientation has intensified. Saudi Arabia remains the wealthiest Arab state, but the largest Arab army belongs to Egypt. Would that army be part of an anti-ISIS coalition? No, for Egypt is no longer the regional power it once was, and its focus remains decidedly internal rather than regional.

In Egypt, regime change did mean foreign policy change. The government of President Muhammad Mursi, of the Muslim Brothers, had difficult relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, but established a close alignment with both Qatar and the Islamist government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. After the 2013 military coup, and the rise of the regime of President ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, Egyptian foreign relations changed dramatically, leading to immediate estrangement from Qatar and Turkey, and an equally immediate new alignment with Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—with the latter two allies providing the new regime with considerable largesse.

While vehemently anti-Islamist, and viewing almost all policies through a counter-terrorism lens, the Sisi regime nonetheless seemed to put crushing the Muslim Brothers far above any concern with ISIS. Even as more militant Islamist movements, such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, emerged to challenge the regime for control of Sinai, the regime continued to insist that the Brothers were the real enemy, intimating that it was the Brothers who were really behind various attacks, even those claimed by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis or ISIS. When ISIS militants murdered Egyptian Copts in Libya, the state did respond with airstrikes. But the focus on the Brothers remained.

Beyond the Arab states, the major non-Arab regional powers—Israel, Iran and Turkey—each took very different approaches to the challenge of ISIS. Israel remained largely neutral, in the sense of not being a direct participant, but not in the sense of being a disinterested party. Israeli security officials were focused on the Syrian war, and had launched airstrikes within Syria against alleged Hizballah targets, but not yet against ISIS. But for the Israeli government, all outcomes were negative: Any ISIS or even alternative Islamist regime was likely to be hostile, and hence appeared perhaps less threatening than the survival of an embattled Baathist regime. In contrast, Iran comprised part of the forces

confronting ISIS directly, in an often odd and uncoordinated de facto coalition with the United States and several European powers, while Turkish policy seemed to be in a bit of a muddle. In the early days of the Arab uprisings, Turkey's government had seemed triumphant. As Islamist regimes emerged in Tunis and Cairo, Erdoğan even participated as an honored guest in meetings of the Arab League—a highly unusual circumstance for a Turkish leader. Yet in short order, old feelings of mistrust reasserted themselves. The Islamist moment seemed short-lived, after all, as Ennahda suffered electoral setbacks in Tunisia while the Muslim Brothers were ousted in Egypt and later banned there, as in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

As the Syrian civil war deepened, Turkey opposed Asad, supporting rebel movements, but refusing to directly intervene. While the state steadfastly denied it, countless reports charged Turkey with arming key factions, including jihadi elements like Jabhat al-Nusra, while also allowing Islamist fighters to cross its borders to join the Syrian opposition. But Turkish policy was, as always, complicated also by the Kurdish question. Local Kurds battled ISIS over the city of Kobane, but Turkey was accused both of facilitating and preventing the flow of Kurdish forces to the front lines against ISIS. After suffering an electoral setback of their own in the summer, Turkish officials began reassessing their approach to the entire ISIS question. When ISIS began bombing Turkish border towns, the policy seemed to shift, with Turkey now more explicitly against ISIS, and being pressured by allies to cross the border to at least create some kind of “safe zone” for refugees and perhaps to intervene even more directly. Turkey's response, however, only underscored the differing priorities of regional regimes, since Erdoğan's government spoke in terms of combating ISIS, while directing most Turkish military attacks at Kurdish forces and especially at the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. Similarly, when Russia intervened even more directly in the Syrian war, with extensive airstrikes, it too claimed to be bombarding ISIS, while unleashing most of its munitions against US-backed rebels fighting the Russian-allied Asad regime.

Next in Line?

To the south of Syria, Jordan faced similar pressures to those of Turkey—including the idea of potentially advancing across the border to create some kind of security zone in southern Syria. Like Turkey and Lebanon, Jordan hosted hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. Indeed, it was not the regional powers, but the geographically proximate and decidedly weaker states—Lebanon and Jordan—that seemed to grasp the urgency of the ISIS threat. Both states saw nationals captured or kidnapped and ultimately murdered by ISIS, but neither was in a position to counter ISIS on its own. Both states claimed to have absorbed more than a million

Syrian refugees each, and were politically, economically and militarily vulnerable, even as they had both managed to avoid the revolutionary impulses of 2011.

It was only after the murder of American hostages that the US began a campaign of military strikes against ISIS, first in Iraq and later in Syria as well. Jordan, a close ally of the US, agreed to join in the airstrikes. King 'Abdallah II insisted that the fight against ISIS was vital to Jordan and to the region, and that it was not at all akin to the deeply

Russian airstrikes in Syria have deepened the existing impasse.

unpopular US war in Iraq that began in 2003. And indeed for Jordan, bordering both Syria and Iraq, the fight was urgent indeed. But while most Jordanians were opposed to ISIS, they differed over whether Jordan should play a direct military role against the group. That debate swung wildly when a Jordanian fighter pilot—Muadh al-Kassasba, was shot down over ISIS-held territory. Jordan suspended its role in airstrikes as it negotiated for the pilot's release from captivity, only to find out that ISIS had burned Kassasba alive weeks earlier. A gruesome video documenting the killing was released, leading Jordan, in response, to execute several high-profile convicted jihadi bombers in its own prisons, and then engage in a renewed series of airstrikes on ISIS targets. Within Jordan, the overwhelming public response was horror at the ghastly ISIS acts. But many voices—albeit quietly—still questioned whether Jordan should be engaged militarily at all.

Even as the Jordanian state attempted to take a lead in forming an Arab coalition against ISIS, with Western backing, many Jordanian officials were frustrated by their own allies' differing views regarding preeminent threats. Saudi Arabia seemed still focused on Iran above all. Qatar remained supportive of Muslim Brother movements, but worried about Iran, even as Egypt and the UAE appeared to see the Brothers, not Iran or ISIS, as the main strategic danger. Indeed, in another major shift in regional international relations, no Arab state seemed to identify Israel as the top anxiety. As alignments continued to shift in response to domestic and regional insecurities, the Israeli and Saudi governments continued to sound ever more similar in their critiques of their US ally and even more so in their near obsession with Iran as the primary enemy, with ISIS decidedly secondary.

When ISIS bombed mosques in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, or slaughtered tourists on the beaches of Tunisia, regional regimes were compelled to confront ISIS as a serious

threat. But another question remained: Which ISIS? Multiple branches of the group had popped up, as with al-Qaeda before. For each regime, fears were partly internal—to what extent did ISIS have a following inside a particular country's borders? Tunisia, for example, has often been said to supply more ISIS recruits than any other Arab country.

The Jordanians, however, attempted to rally regional support for a campaign against what remained “ISIS central”—the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. At the Arab League summit in March in Egypt, the regimes acknowledged that militant Islamism and jihadi extremism were their greatest and most immediate challenges. They even agreed, in principle, to form a pan-Arab military coalition. The Joint Arab Force was supposed to comprise at least 40,000 troops, to be drawn mainly from Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Gulf Cooperation Council countries. These were to include land, air and naval contingents in a kind of rapid reaction force. But the Arab League has long been a forum whose solemn communiqués and bluster produce little action, and is hardly a real alliance, or a military coalition. Even when Saudi Arabia did manage to assemble a military coalition of Arab states, it was deployed to Yemen, not against ISIS.

In addition to lagging in meaningful military cooperation, the regimes tellingly differed in regards to what they meant by extremism or militancy. Regimes individually decried groups and states varying from the Muslim Brothers to al-Qaeda to ISIS to Iran. Regime opponents and critics in some of these same states pointed to the authoritarian brutality of many of the regimes themselves as the main security threat to the peoples of the region, and one that enabled violent challengers like ISIS to emerge in the first place.

As ISIS, meanwhile, continued to rule swathes of Iraq and Syria while urging and sponsoring attacks across the region and beyond, it remained striking that unlike every regional power before it, this one had no regional or global backer (despite countless conspiracy theories to the contrary). At face value, ISIS had alienated almost every state in the region and every global power. One would think that would lead to a countervailing coalition that would make short work of ISIS. Yet each regime remained focused on different domestic and external security concerns. ISIS had appeared in part because of state failure. Further expansion would depend on ISIS being able to visit that formula on other places. It was for that reason that the governments and publics in both Lebanon and Jordan remained deeply concerned that regional and global allies had, thus far, proved unwilling or incapable of countering ISIS, while they themselves could not do so alone, but also feared that they were next in line. In November 2015, ISIS suicide bombers struck Baghdad, Beirut and Paris, with devastating effects. Countries in the region and well beyond—including the United States, Russia, France and other European states—spoke of the urgent need finally to unite against ISIS. But, in order to do so, they would have to overcome their considerable differences in security priorities and more. ■