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**14. ABSTRACT**

Terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) have capitalized on the Syrian Civil War to seize territory and build support for transnational jihadist terrorism. This paper seeks to illuminate the socio-cultural tensions within Syria that are root causes of the current conflict and thus enabling the growth of ISIL. The six major tensions examined in this paper are: modernism-traditionalism, socioeconomic antagonism, ethnic conflict, Islam-Islamism, *takfiri* driven conflict, and sectarianism. This paper traces the development of the underlying issues feeding the current conflict, and posits a conflict of identity has been the root problem. The conclusion notes the divergent views of the anti-Assad and anti-ISIL factions, and suggests secular ideologies such as Arab nationalism and Kurdish nationalism provide the strongest counter narrative to ISIL's jihadi-Islamism.

**15. SUBJECT TERMS**
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<u>UNTANGLING THE GORDIAN KNOT?</u>
<u>THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CHALLENGE OF SYRIA</u>


by


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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the
requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily
endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.


Signature: _____


**30 October 2015**

**<u>Paper Abstract</u>**

Terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat al-Nusra

(JN) have capitalized on the Syrian Civil War to seize territory and build support for

transnational jihadist terrorism.  This paper seeks to illuminate the socio-cultural tensions

within Syria that are root causes of the current conflict and thus enabling the growth of ISIL.

The six major tensions examined in this paper are: modernism-traditionalism, socioeconomic

antagonism, ethnic conflict, Islam-Islamism, *takfiri* driven conflict, and sectarianism.  This

paper traces the development of the underlying issues feeding the current conflict, and posits

a conflict of identity has been the root problem.  The conclusion notes the divergent views of

the anti-Assad and anti-ISIL factions, and suggests secular ideologies such as Arab

nationalism and Kurdish nationalism provide the strongest counter narrative to ISIL's jihadi-

Islamism.

"We do not understand the movement, and until we do, we are not going to defeat it …
We have not defeated the idea.  We do not even understand the idea."

- Major General Mike Nagata,
  Commander, Special Operations Command – Central.
  August 2014.[1]

The socio-cultural environment of Syria presents significant challenges for the U.S. in the area of counterterrorism.  Within the complex relationships between ethnic, religious and social groups are rifts that can be exploited by radical ideologies such as ISIL's brand of Sunni jihadism.[2]  This brief examination seeks to illuminate these tensions which are enabling the rise of ISIL, and thus provide a framework for understanding that can facilitate the development of approaches to counter ISIL.

Six major sets of tensions, and several subsets, mark the most significant fault lines within modern Syrian culture.[3]  Underlying these friction points is a more fundamental question of modernity and identity: what does it mean to be "Syrian" in a postmodern globalized society?  The first major tension is between modernist and traditionalist conceptions, and includes subelements such as divisions between urban and rural populations, gender issues, and the tension between secular and religious views.  A second tension is the socioeconomic divide, expressed in social class antagonisms.  A third tension is between ethnic groups, predominantly Arab and non-Arab, which includes Kurds, Persians and other minorities.  A fourth tension is mainstream Islam (as a religion) in contrast with

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[1]  MG Nagata was referring to the ideological appeal of ISIL.  Quoted in Eric Schmitt, "In Battle to Defang ISIS, U.S. Targets Its Psychology," New York Times, 28 Dec 2014.
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/29/us/politics/in-battle-to-defang-isis-us-targets-its-psychology-.html?_r=0
Accessed 18 Aug 2015.
[2] The organization has been referred to in various sources as "ISIS", "ISIL", "IS", "Islamic State", and "Daesh". For consistency, this paper uses the term "ISIL" (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).
[3] This paper uses the term "modern" as a general description of the time period when cognitive frameworks based on rationality become the norm.

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Islamism (a political ideology that uses particular interpretations of Islam as a source of legitimacy), an issue closely related with the aforementioned modernism and religion. A fifth tension is between fundamentalist *takfiri* groups and those they unilaterally designate as apostates. The final tension is between religious sects, particularly Sunni and Shi'ite. Some of these tensions are deep historic issues, some are based on a more recent intellectual discomfort with modernity, and others are constructs that further political aims of groups such as Al Qaeda or ISIL.

Underlying the complex cultural conflicts within Syrian society is the inheritance of early Islamic, Byzantine, Ottoman and French colonial experiences. The history of Syria in the latter half of the twentieth century is interwoven with the thread of the postcolonial narrative, as the independent state struggles to define itself. A brief summary of some of the most salient points and key historical developments will provide the appropriate context for interpretation and analysis of Syrian sociocultural tensions.[4]

During the 7th and 8th centuries, the early expansion of Islam rapidly seized the Syrian region from the Byzantine Empire, and Damascus became the initial capital of the Islamic political entity, the Umayyad Caliphate.[5] Located on the frontiers between the Byzantine, Sasanid Persian and Arab civilizations, this region, and particularly the cities Aleppo and Damascus, served as cosmopolitan centers of economic and intellectual exchange.[6]

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[4] This study has limited the historical scope in order to focus on the most relevant issues that directly affect contemporary Syria. For deeper exploration of pre-Islamic Syria, see Trevor Bryce, *Ancient Syria: A Three Thousand Year History* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

[5] Ross Burns, *Damascus: A History* (NY: Routledge, 2005), 98-108. G.R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate, AD 661-750* (NY: Routledge, 2000), 38.

[6] On the role of these cities as centers of learning and ideas see Majid Fakhry, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), 111-113, 303, 326, et al.

Aleppo and the surrounding area provided a safe haven for non-orthodox interpretations and sects, such as Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, and Monophysite Christians. While the Umayyad period saw Arabisation of the Aramaic-speaking, predominantly Christian Syrian population, the Caliphate government did not desire widespread conversion to Islam, as this would entail a loss of revenue.[7] The Umayyad period was marked by frequent upheaval and civil war, not over religious issues but struggles between Arab tribes for political control. Following the 'Abbasid defeat of the Umayyads, the next several hundred years saw a multiethnic polity home to a wide range of religious beliefs, although the level of religious tolerance was in the eye of the beholder. Christian and Jewish communities were accepted, but treatment of Muslim sects varied from region to region. The Nusayri-Alawi sect of Shi'ism was founded in late 9th century Basra by Ibn Nusayr, who claimed to have been an intimate associate of the 10th and 11th imams. Persecuted by Sunni 'Abbasid administrators of southern Iraq and excommunicated by other Shi'ite groups, the Nusayri maintained an underground network of the faithful, using the doctrine of *taqiyya* (concealment of beliefs) to survive. In the 10th century, Nusayri leader Al-Husayn ibn Hamdan al-Khasibi moved the sect from Basra to northern Syria, an area seen as more tolerant of non-orthodox sects.[8] The Nusayri-Alawi sect (Alawites) flourished in the urban commercial space of northern Syria. The region which would become contemporary northwest Syria was a site of multisectarian tolerance and a center of trade.

The Ottoman era (1516-1918) saw the longest period of relative peace and stability in Syrian history, demonstrating the concept of a caliphate can coexist with, and be part of, a

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[7] Non-Muslim subjects were required to pay a poll tax (*jizya*), while Muslim subjects were exempt. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam*, 77-78.

[8] Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayri-Alawis: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria.* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 7-13, 23.

modern state. The Ottoman Turks based their claim to legitimacy on Sunni orthodoxy and

*shari'a* (judicial system based on the Sunnah). The Ottoman Sultan claimed the title of

Caliph, and represented the Ottoman Empire as the Sunni opposite to Safavid Persian

Shi'ism. The association of Twelver Shi'ism with the Persian "other" deepened the

distinction from the Ismaili, Alawi and Druze forms of Shi'ism present within Syria. For the

first 150 years of Ottoman rule, Damascus and its surroundings (*Bilad al-Sham*) were an

important east-west trade hub between Europe and Asia. This trade declined as Europeans

sought alternative maritime trade routes that bypassed the Ottoman Empire. In the mid-17th

century, a major shift occurred as a north-south pilgrimage route replaced the east-west trade

route.[9] Ottoman authorities emphasized the importance of the *Hajj*, or pilgrimage to

religious sites at Mecca in the Hijaz, further legitimizing Ottoman control of the entire

region. The Ottoman regime kept both the pilgrimage routes and the holy sites safe for the

Muslim world, bolstering their legitimacy through the tradition of *Hajj*.

This era also saw the development of social categories that form an important legacy

for contemporary Syrian sociocultural identities. The Ottoman *millet* system defined subjects

by religious community; the subsequent emergence of nationalist movements in the 19th

century would seek to redefine these populations by shared linguistic heritage.[10] In Ottoman

society, Syrian Arab Muslims were still subjects (*ra'aya*) beneath Turkish Muslims,

providing some undercurrents that would support the emergence of Arab nationalism in the

late 19th century. Socioeconomic stratification increased in Ottoman Syria with the

emergence of the *a'yan* (notables) in the late 17th century, wealthy merchant families who

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[9] James A. Reilly, *A Small Town in Syria: Ottoman Hama in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (NY: Peter Lang, 2002), 22-23. Burns 228.
[10] M. Sükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 25, 142.

dominated local politics with the key cities such as Aleppo and Damascus. The *a'yan* imported European ideas and aspects of European culture. They also tended to lead Sufi orders, espousing traditions of Islamic mysticism that emphasize individual religious experience as opposed to more rigid adherence to teachings of orthodox religious scholars.[11]

The Ottoman system collapsed in the late 19th and early 20th century. The Empire failed to effectively modernize and was overtaken by the forces of Turkish and then Arab nationalism. Reforms of the Tanzimat era did not resolve obsolete social structures; Sultan Abdulhamid II sought to prop up declining legitimacy through construction of traditions suggesting his leadership of modern Islam.[12] Ironically, Hamid II used Islamist language and symbols while suppressing Islamist intellectuals and censuring debate. As a result, the *Salafist* movement grew in Syria as an opposition to Hamidian interpretations of Islam.[13] Simultaneously, the *Nahdah* (Renaissance) movement promoted a distinct Arab identity that included both Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs, redefining the community along ethno-linguistic lines as opposed to sectarian. These powerful forces were unleashed in the colossal conflict of the First World War, shattering the Ottoman Empire.

The contemporary history of Syria begins in 1918, marked by a postwar narrative of Western betrayal and colonial occupation.[14] A key moment in the Syrian Arab nationalist narrative occurred on 30 September 1918, when the Arab *a'yan* of Damascus convinced the Ottoman Turkish administrators to depart rather than fight an unwinnable battle. The *a'yan* put up flags and prepared to welcome an Arab ruler, Prince Feisal, who was traveling north

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[11] Burns 290; Hanioglu 94-96; Reilly 30-31.
[12] Hanioglu 126-8. Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
[13] Hanioglu 140.
[14] David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (NY: Holt, 2001).

with T.E. Lawrence and the Arab forces. On the morning of 1 October, the Australian 10th Light Horse bypassed the Arabs and rode through the city, disrupting the planned triumphal procession and undercutting Feisal as the "liberator of Damascus". The Arab forces arrived later that day, but the narrative of Western betrayal was already emerging.[15] This was a visible demonstration of the Sykes-Picot concept of the Arab people as subjects or objects and not as actors.[16]

This theme of betrayal is critical for an understanding of Syrian cultural and intellectual development in the 1950s and 1960s. Following independence from the French colonial regime, Syria faced a crisis of identity. Syrian and Arab intellectuals faced a dilemma in constructing the metanarrative of Syria, as adoption of Western intellectual traditions and concepts threatened the authenticity of such a project.[17] Defining a people as a "nation" based on a shared consciousness expressed through print-capitalism faced an additional challenge.[18] How could the state of Syria have nationalism in the Western sense if the literary tradition upon which to build such a concept is Arabic-Islamic, and not Syrian? Middle Eastern intellectuals sought distinctive forms of identity, resulting in pan-Arabism and Nasserism. These concepts were a rejection of the arbitrary boundaries and categories

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[15] Burns 268-70.

[16] The "object" as described in Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (NY: Pantheon, 1972), 40-9.

[17] On the development of Arab thought during this period, see Yoav Di Capua, "Arab Existentialism: An Invisible Chapter in the Intellectual History of Decolonization," *American Historical Review* 117 (2012): 1061-1091.

[18] This theory of nationalism originates in the classic Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (NY: Verso, 1983). See also John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (NY: St Martin's Press,1982); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1788* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

imposed by Western powers – Britain and France – at Versailles and in the League of

Nations Mandate system.[19]

The alternatives to nationalism included Marxism, based on perceived socioeconomic

inequities, and Islamism, which grew significantly post-1967 as a political alternative to Arab

nationalism or international socialism.  The oil crisis of the 1970s buttressed traditional elites

(such as the Saudi monarchy) and widened the gulf between social classes across the region,

increasing the appeal of all varieties of socialism.

From the Syrian perspective, the Camp David Accords of 1978 demonstrated Egypt

was no longer willing to hold the mantle of Nasserist leadership, and Damascus took up this

role.[20]   Ba'athist regimes, such as Syria, remained strong until the 1991-2003 time period.[21]

The end of the Cold War in 1989-91 removed international socialism as a viable alternative

ideological structure for the Arab world.  The 2003 Iraq War and the revolutionary upheavals

of Arab Spring delegitimized Baathist regimes, leaving political Islam (Islamism) as the only

remaining major ideological narrative.

As Arab Spring spread to Syria, the intellectual underpinnings of the regime have

eroded, leaving Assad (the younger) with only increasing levels of force to compel

submission.  As we survey the political landscape in Syria in 2015, we see the Assad regime

lacks legitimacy, being propped up by the vestiges of its previous monopoly of force.

Among the disparate actors in Syria, the remaining ideological drivers are divisive:  Kurdish

nationalism excludes all other ethnic groups; Hezbollah, Quwat al-Ridha, and other Shi'ite

militias have sectarian agendas that are antithetical to Sunni groups; the Islamist jihadi

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[19] For an overview of Syrian politics during this era, see Raymond Hinnebusch, "Modern Syrian Politics,"
*History Compass* 6/1 (2008): 263-285.
[20] Fouad Ajami, "Between Cairo and Damascus," *Foreign Affairs*, 444-461.
[21] Although note the increasing tendency of nationalist leaders to appeal to Islamists, such as Saddam Hussein's
increasing use of Islamic religious symbolism to represent the Iraqi state.

organizations such as ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), and Ansar ash-Sham also have a clear exclusionary agenda. The Free Syrian Army and "moderate" groups lack a true unifying principle, as negative ideologies are inherently weak.

At first glance, the conflict between the Assad regime and ISIL seems to be a direct reflection of the modernist-traditionalist tension. However, the actual situation is more complex. While most fundamentalist religious movements rely heavily on a conservative-traditionalist mindset, ISIL demonstrates an unusual blend of modern and tradition. It is useful to view ISIL as a socio-cultural revolutionary phenomena, as it seeks to radically transform Syrian society using invented traditions and a particular interpretation of Islam as a source of legitimacy.[22] The void created by ISIL's social revolution is filled by invented traditions, an attempt to link ISIL with 7th century Islam and thus provide a firmament for legitimacy. ISIL plays on fear of change and modernity, and cloaks its own radical program under a veil of constructed tradition.

This synthesis of old and new ideas is similar to the "reactionary modernism" of the Nazi movement, which combined symbolism of a constructed past (e.g. torchlit ceremonies and Roman Legion-style standards) with the most modern ideas of the time (e.g. mass politics, video technology and scientific propaganda).[23] In this method ISIL is able to coopt the Enlightenment without accompaniment of liberalism, thus becoming a much more powerful movement than peer organizations or earlier manifestations of Islamic jihadist movements. Old imagery and ritual provides legitimacy for revolutionary change. In

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[22] On the concept of invented traditions as an effort for modern polities to build legitimacy through the appearance of connection with the past, see the classic Hobsbawm, *Invention of Tradition* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1983). See also Loretta Napoleoni, *Islamist Phoenix* (Seven Stories, 2014), 12, on use of myth by ISIL.
[23] Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Peter Fritzsche, "Nazi Modern." *Modernism/Modernity*, 3:1 (1996): 1-22.

Hobsbawm's typology, this is the second major form of invented tradition, a construct to establish and legitimize authority.[24]

ISIL has shown a high degree of sophistication in using these constructs to sidestep the modernist-traditionalist tension and generate appeal. One example of this cognitive tactic is ISIL's handling of gender issues. As a microcosm of the larger issue of modernization, the role of women within Syrian society is a litmus test for cultural norms and helps explain why reductionist solutions are cognitively unpalatable. From the Western perspective, with a teleological view of social change, an intuitive solution seems to be to build liberal society in Syria by pressuring Syria to adopt norms such as gender equality. However, in a non-Western interpretation this can be seen as a form of Foucauldian epistemic violence.[25] Such schemes have been attempted in the past, and failed to take root. During the 1920s, the Soviet Union invested heavily in efforts to "modernize" Islamic societies in Central Asia by engineering gender equality, using women as a "surrogate proletariat" in a pre-industrial society that lacked an oppressed working class.[26] The Soviets found that Islamic women, possibly following the tenets of *taqiyya*, went through the motions of supporting Soviet gender equality programs in government sponsored public venues, but reverted to traditional societal roles at other times. The Soviet experiment at social engineering was a failure. Another example is the British efforts to criminalize *sati* (widow immolation) in India during the Raj period. The British encountered a surprisingly hostile opposition, initially focused on a lack of British understanding of Hindu traditional ritual and culture, while subsequent

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[24] Hobsbawm, *Invention of Tradition*, 9.

[25] See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (NY: Pantheon, 1980); Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (NY: Pantheon, 1972).

[26] Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

postcolonial criticism focused on the inability for the subject to participate in the debate.[27]
The role of women within ISIL is difficult to discern, as ISIL attempts to maintain absolute
control over information coming from ISIL territory.  However, analysis of the cases of
women joining ISIL from Western countries suggests ISIL desires female recruits for the
information operations value (primarily to shame men into jihad) and not as fighters.  ISIL
prefers to have women marry jihadi men and propagate (AUAB's "birthing strategy"); ISIL
leaders handle assertive women who want to be fighters by making them suicide bombers,
thus eliminating potential challenges to ISIL's social order.[28] By obfuscating the role of
women within ISIL controlled territory, ISIL attempts to avoid alienating potential female
recruits, and maintains an amorphous blend of traditionalism and modernism.  Control of
information and messaging provides ISIL with an advantage in the cognitive domain.

Socioeconomic class structure within Syria has evolved under the Assad regime,
beginning with widespread land reforms in the 1960s that broke the power of the old
landlords and transformed Syrian agriculture.  Ba'athist reforms did not alleviate poverty,
however, thus leaving a large segment of rural poor consisting of smallholders and
agricultural workers.  Migration from rural areas to the major cities has increased the urban
lower class, but this class remains fragmented and divided.   On the other side of the
spectrum, the old *a'yan* elites, merchants and landed families have provided the most pre-
Civil War opposition to the Ba'athist regime, seeking liberal economic and conservative

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[27] Lati Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on SATI in Colonial India," *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 7, Fall
1987, p. 119-156.  On the postcolonial interpretation see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern
Speak?" in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke:
Macmillan, 1988), 271-313. Compare similar resistance to efforts to manage gender issues in British colonies in
Africa: Susan Pederson, "National Bodies, Unspeakable Acts: The Sexual Politics of Colonial Policy-Making,"
*Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 63, 1991.  p647-680.
[28] Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*,
38:7, 495-509. For more general background on women and Islamic society, see Leila Ahmed, *Women and
Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

religious agendas.[29] The petit bourgeoisie, consisting primarily of urban middle class merchants and small business owners, had been the most reliable source of support for the Assad regime.[30]  Although the Assad regime has lost legitimacy across much of Syria, the major urban centers in the west retain a core social group that desire to retain their current position in society.  Market reforms in the decade prior to the civil war  increased the socioeconomic divide between the petit bourgeoisie and the urban lower class.  Ceding control of the rural countryside to rebels has not negatively affected the urban power base of the regime.

The history of Syria as a borderland has resulted in a mix of ethnic groups that define themselves based upon cultural elements such as language, religion, and historic communal relationships.  The Syrian Kurds form the largest ethnic minority, forming about 10% of the Syrian population.  The Kurds form sizeable minorities in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran, although frequently divided internally.  Within Syria, the Assad regime manipulated the Kurdish minority, denying citizenship to over 200,000 Kurds while allowing the PKK safe haven to continue its struggle against the Turkish government.  Assad eventually expelled the PKK when Turkey threatened to intervene in 1998.  Following the outbreak of civil war in Syria in March 2011, an unknown group assassinated Mishaal Tammo, the moderate leader of the Syrian Kurdish Future Movement, and a new, PKK-affiliated group called the PYD emerged as the strongest organization representing the Kurdish ethnicity.  Like the PKK, the PYD has had tactical alliances of convenience with the Assad regime; the objectives of the PYD are autonomy and legal recognition of the Kurdish minority, and they see Turkey as a more significant adversary than Assad.  In July 2012, Assad pulled government forces out of

[29] Raymond Hinnebusch, "Class and State in Ba'thist Syria," in *Syria: Society, Culture and Polity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).
[30] Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad* (NY: I.B. Tauris, 1995).

the northeast Kurdish region, giving de facto autonomy to the Kurds. The PYD established a government at al-Qamishli, and the area has become a liberal autonomous region called Rojava.[31] The Kurds have rallied behind the concept of Kurdish nationalism, which has proven to be a resilient alternative to Islamist groups such as ISIL.

The tension between Islam and Islamist groups is perhaps the most divisive rift within Syrian society, and is directly linked to the problems of modernity and the relationship between religion and politics. In Western tradition, separation of church and state was a product of the Wars of Reformation and Enlightenment in the Early Modern era. A similar development did not occur in the Islamic world, and until collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, political and religious leadership was formally united in a single person. The Ottoman sultan was the political ruler of the empire, but also held the title of caliph, and thus was the religious head of the Sunni *umma*. After the Ottoman collapse, and Turkey's embrace of secularism under Atatürk, some Islamic theorists sought to create political movements that would recreate the unity of political structures and Islamic religion. The result was Islamism, or political Islam, a distinct ideology that formed the basis behind the Muslim Brotherhood founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928 in Egypt. The Islamist movement formed a third alternative, behind nationalism and socialism, in the crisis of identity during decolonization of the Middle East. Sayyid Qutb built upon this concept, and influenced the development of the jihadist Islamism of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and, subsequently, al-Qaeda. While jihadism advocates the use of violence to achieve Islamist ends, institutional Islamism seeks to work within existing political structures. Jihadists reject the democratic process entirely, and seek to establish an Islamic state by force. Institutional Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, seek victory at election polls and seek to achieve

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[31] Michael Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," *Third World Quarterly* 34:3 (2013), 441-457.

political control through democratic means.[32]  The tension between religious Islam and political Islam (Islamism) is one of the strongest in the Syrian conflict;  ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra and other jihadist groups, as well as institutional Islamist groups such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, are in direct ideological conflict with "moderate" Islamic groups.

The more radical of the jihadist groups have brought the conflict to a new level with the concept of *takfir* (accusation of apostasy).  Under this idea, radical jihadist groups justify attacks against Muslims.  By adopting *takfiri* doctrine, ISIL leaders seek to coerce Syrian Muslims into joining ISIL, and legitimize violence against all opposition to ISIL rule, even from Muslims.  The *takfiri* concept fuels conflict, but also removes some of the anti-Western and anti-Christian aspects of ISIL's struggle.  While the use of *takfir* may provide a short term tactical advantage to ISIL, the strategic cost may be significant, due to the potential for alienation from other Islamic groups.  *Takfir* declarations can unify opposition to ISIL and create rifts between potential Salafist partners.  Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has declared Muslim Brotherhood members are heretics, and ISIL has attacked Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, all justified using *takfiri* doctrine.  The rift between these extremist groups could be deepened and widened through subtle and clandestine use of information operations, keeping in mind the obvious danger of any interventionalist policy is uniting these factions against a common external enemy.

The final major cultural tension in the Syrian civil war is sectarian conflict.  The long history of the Syrian region as a religiously diverse area and a haven for many non-orthodox sects suggests the impetus behind sectarian conflict is relatively new to Syria.  Although the Assad regime was dominated by Alawites,  the Nasayri-Alawi religious doctrine was not a

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[32] Bassam Tibi, "Islamism and Democracy: On the Compatibility of Institutional Islamism and the Political Culture of Democracy," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10:2 (2009), 135-164.  Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of Al-Qa'id and the Arab Jihadists* (London: Saqi, 2010), 43-46.

driving factor behind Assad's suppression of political opposition.  The introduction of

Salafist-based jihadism in the Sunni Arab areas, particularly through Jabhat al-Nusra and

ISIL, has ushered in sectarian conflict with Shi'ites in Syria.[33]  These groups are attempting

to redefine the conflict as a sectarian struggle, as opposed to a political struggle, in an effort

to gain legitimacy among Sunni Muslims.  The situation is exacerbated by the Assad regime,

by bringing in the Iranian proxy Lebanese Hezbollah.[34]  The situation in Lebanon has long

been marked by a three-way sectarian struggle, and Hezbollah brings this mindset to Syria.

The Syrian Civil War cannot be properly described as a Sunni revolt against a Shi'ite regime;

such a reductionist interpretation fails to adequately define the true nature of this conflict.

The keys to influencing this conflict are found in a thorough understanding of Syrian

cultural identity.  Salafi jihadist groups feed on fears of modernity and the threat to

traditional Syrian culture.  Mobilizing an effective opposition and counternarrative requires

an ideological basis that is currently lacking among the moderate opposition.  With the

failures of nationalist and socialist ideological schemas, Islamism is winning by default.  To

combat this on a cultural level, an authentic Syrian alternative must emerge.  A simple

coalition of "anti-ISIL" elements lacks the ideological weight to effectively mobilize support.

During the Russian Civil War, a wide range of anti-Bolshevik forces, aided by external

support, failed to coalesce.  Disparate groups of Whites, Greens, Social Revolutionaries, and

other factions were unable to provide viable alternatives and unify opposition to the

Bolsheviks unifying ideology, convincing narrative, and effective use of information

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[33] On the role of Salafism in the contemporary jihadist mileu, see Frazer Egerton, *Jihad in the West: The Rise of Militant Salafism* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[34] An exploration of the role of Hezbollah is outside the scope of this limited study.  For further background, see Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) and Dominique Avon, *Hezbollah: A History of the "Party of God"* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012).

operations and the latest technology.  An ideological force, such as a strong Syrian national identity, might provide an opportunity for countering ISIL's terror.

Restated in simpler terms, merely providing arms and training to a Syrian opposition to ISIL is unlikely to generate success.  Moderate groups that lack a driving ideology are easily fragmented, and their members tend to drift away to stronger causes.  This is particularly evident with the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council. Additionally, overt U.S. support can severely undercut the legitimacy of a cause or leader by creating the appearance of Western interests taking primacy over those of the Syrian people. The most successful and resilient ideological counter to ISIL's violent Islamism has been Kurdish nationalism.  Policy makers might consider an end state with Syria partitioned between a Kurdish state or autonomous region and a strong secular Arab state.  Such an arrangement would leave little space (cognitive or geographical) for ISIL, JN, and similar groups.  Additionally, in building the foundation for an Arab state, the ideas of nationalism, Nasserism, or even Ba'athism should not be dismissed based solely on excesses and abuse of power by the autocratic regimes of Assad and Hussein.  Similarly, the brutality of ISIL and JN should not be extrapolated into a representation of all Islam.  Arab nationalism has immense power as a hegemonic identity that can provide an alternative to the jihadist narrative.  A key to reaching a viable resolution of the conflict is acceptance of the validity of these alternatives.

This is an intricate and complex problem that requires a sophisticated solution, not merely kinetic strikes.  Alexander the Great, an exceptional military and strategic leader, was never able to unravel the problem of the Gordian knot.  Lacking patience for a complex problem with a lengthy solution, Alexander "solved" it using brute force.  He made the

problem go away, but did not truly unravel it.[35]  Truly solving the problem of ISIL in Syria

will require patience and sophistication, not a simple application of force.

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[35] Plutarch, *Lives, Volume VII: Demosthenes and Cicero. Alexander and Caesar*.  Loeb Classical Library 99 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1919)

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