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International Creations: The Case of Iraq, Syria, and Jordan

Brittany Hale

June 9, 2015

Today, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, has arguably become the most pressing international concern. The United States' invasion into Iraq, followed by the Iraqi Civil War, and now, the ongoing civil war in Syria, has called each state's national borders into question. ISIS claims large portions of what was once Iraq and Syria, all while Jordan remains relatively stable and has joined the United States in the fight against ISIS. While these countries all have similar backgrounds and were created after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Jordan has had arguably more success maintaining national unity. With this in mind, the question I will attempt to answer in this essay is: What explains Jordan's relative stability in comparison to Iraq and Syria, which have similar histories, as well as sectarian and ethnic fragmentation?

The question of national unity is important because it is a precursor to the possibility of democracy.<sup>1</sup> According to Georg Sorenson, author of *Democracy and Democratization*, a state's transition to democracy must go through several steps, beginning with forming national unity. If ethnic or religious conflict exists within a society, it must be ironed out, with each side conceding that they are a part of one national community. "It is only when... divisions lead to basic questioning of national unity that the problem must be resolved before a transition to democracy becomes feasible," Sorenson writes.<sup>2</sup> Applying this concept to the Middle East illustrates that states like Syria and Iraq, who suffer from a lack of national unity, are not on a trajectory to attain democracy or stability. Comparing these three states

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<sup>1</sup> Sorenson, Georg. *Democracy and Democratization*. Westview Press. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

should provide insight into what factors do contribute to stability and ultimately democratization.

To answer my question about Jordan's relative stability, I will examine the history of each state, paying attention to the diverse ethnic and religious identities present within the artificial borders drawn by western powers after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Looking at the physical location of each state, as well as its internal geography, will help demonstrate Jordan's strategic location to international powers and illuminate which geographic factors make it difficult to govern in Iraq and Syria. Then, analyzing each state in terms of the level of outside or foreign involvement, from independence to present day, will show how their ability to build a national identity has been helped or hindered by international actors. This is important because many scholars point to outside forces as the reason for Jordan's success at maintaining internal cohesion between diverse groups, while others point to the United States, Britain, and France to help explain the current chaos in Syria and Iraq. The final task of this paper will be to compare and contrast each state with one another in these specific categories, pinpointing key differences that have ultimately led to Jordan's success, as opposed to Iraq and Syria, which have become contested territories.

After examining the literature and data related to these three states, it is evident that foreign involvement and levels of diversity within each state are huge factors when it comes to successful nation building and stability. Jordan is fundamentally different from Iraq and Syria because of its history, while under British control, of incorporating tribes into the ruling bargain and the regime's

importance to western powers. Meanwhile, Iraq and Syria's histories are wrought with examples of international actors meddling in their internal affairs, employing "divide and conquer" strategies against the state's ethnic and religious groups. The fact that Iraq and Syria are both incredibly diverse states, especially in comparison to Jordan, does not help their situation. This research will be important in that it may help illuminate what strategies and conditions are most effective when it comes to forming a national identity and maintaining internal cohesion.

Prior to considering the literature related to stability, state building, and national identity, it's necessary to look into key issues that are affecting the Middle East, including the ongoing friction with Israel and the Sunni and Shia divide. These factors create a climate of conflict within the region, affecting Iraq, Syria, and Jordan very differently. The next section is only meant as a brief overview of these incredibly complicated topics and will provide important context for the struggle to maintain national unity in Iraq and Syria, as well as Jordan's success.

### Background

In order to understand politics in Iraq and Syria, you must have a basic understanding of the Sunni and Shia conflict that has become engrained in both countries' histories. Since the rise of the Ba'ath party in Iraq in the 1960s and the subsequent rule of Saddam Hussein, the state has been primarily governed by a minority group of Sunnis. A major shift in power happened after the fall of Saddam in 2003, with the Shiite majority seizing control of government positions and pushing Sunnis to the sidelines. Shiite leaders appeared to immediately seek retribution for their marginalization under Saddam. In fact, not long after the United

States withdrew from Iraq, Shiite Prime Minister Al Maliki issued a warrant for Sunni Vice President al-Hashimi, accusing the VP of planning terrorist attacks aimed at Shiites and forcing him to flee the state.<sup>3</sup> Dexter Filkins, who reported on the Iraq War for the New York Times, told PBS Frontline that Maliki sees the Sunni minority as “...a population that despises him and wants to come back into power.”<sup>4</sup> ISIS is actually primarily comprised of Sunnis, many of whom held positions in Saddam’s army before it was disbanded by the United States during the Iraq War.<sup>5</sup>

Like Iraq, Syria is also struggling with internal unrest stemming from the Sunni and Shia conflict. Alawites, a minority group in Syria who belong to a branch of the Shia stream of Islam, have also received privileged positions within Syrian government. These privileges exist in a state that is predominantly Sunni and in a region where most countries are under Sunni rule. “There is a broad Sunni-Shia fight for supremacy, in which Saudi Arabia and Iran are the main protagonists at state level,” according to author John Bew, who alludes to the regional aspect of the conflict in the Middle East. In this context, Syria has become the site of a proxy war between Sunni and Shia nations. With a population that is almost entirely Sunni, Jordan simply does not suffer from sectarian cleavages as Syria and Iraq do. Aside from the role of religious divisions in the Middle East, Israel has become a point of contention between Arab states and western allies, including Jordan.

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<sup>3</sup> Totten, Michael J. 2015. "Let Iraq Die." *World Affairs* 177, no. 6: 17-23. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 4, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Mastracci, Davide. "How the 'catastrophic' American Decision to Disband Saddam's Military Helped Fuel the Rise of ISIL." *National Post*, May 23, 2015, World News sec. Accessed June 8, 2015.

Speaking broadly, Iraq, Syria, and Jordan exist in a region that is still experiencing tension and continued conflict over the creation of Israel, causing each state to pick sides. Jordan, next door to Israel, is now home to many Palestinians who were forced to leave their homes in Palestine. Other actors, most notably Iran, are actively seeking Israel's demise by arming Hezbollah, who has consistently carried out attacks against Israeli troops.<sup>6</sup> Jordan's relationship with Israel has been tumultuous, with Jordan initially joining other Arab countries against Israel before finally signing a peace treaty in 1994.<sup>7</sup> Now the country walks a fine line between advocating for the rights of displaced Palestinians and acting as an ally to Israel.

#### The Literature: State Formation, Foreign Involvement, and Regime Tactics

The literature on the subject of nation building, stability, and national identity in the Middle East has three important themes: the importance of boundaries and their representation of the population's tribal, religious, and ethnic identities, the role of outside influence in increasing fragmentation or promoting growth, and finally, the ability of regimes to form productive relationships with minorities and ethnic groups or create situations that ultimately lead to conflict. Each of these schools of thought would provide different answers to my initial question, pointing to geographic, internal, or external factors. For this analysis, I will rely heavily on the first two schools of thought because ultimately, a nation like

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<sup>6</sup> "The United States Institute for Peace: The Iran Primer." Iran and Israel. Accessed June 10, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> "The Jordan-Israeli Peace Treaty." King Abdullah II Official Website. Accessed June 10, 2015.

Jordan with less diversity will meet with less resistance when forming a ruling bargain. Also, the involvement of international powers can either buttress a regime or cause it to collapse, as was the case with Iraq and arguably Syria.

The first important aspect of the literature is that when a national identity is non-existent, or doesn't correspond to a state's territory, the current regime's legitimacy can be questioned, according to Hinnebusch (2003), Soltan (1997), and Tomass (2012). In regards to Iraq and Syria, they have become contested territories where sectarian violence and religious extremism has grown. Meanwhile, Jordan has managed to maintain a strong state and at least some national unity, although Lucas (2008) believes that Jordan's regime has come close to upsetting this delicate balance on several occasions. It may be that states like Iraq and Syria, which have territories that are not well matched with the identities of their citizens, are unlikely to succeed. Fragmentation in a state's identity can have disastrous consequences on domestic politics, with actors sometimes choosing violence as a means to overthrow what they see as an illegitimate regime that does not represent their interests. Another important matter present in the literature is the role of international or regional factors in setting up a nation's success or failure.

When considering the role of divergent national, regional, and tribal identities, it's important to take into context each state's regional politics and the level of foreign involvement, as the literature shows. Hinnebusch (2003) is very useful for this type of analysis and points out that the imposition of artificial borders by western powers has had negative consequences for state building. Events like the Cold War and the creation of Israel also caused groups within Iraq, Syria, and Jordan



to react, according to Lucas (2008) and Trentin (2008). While Trentin (2008) says that Iraq and Syria played both sides of the Cold War to promote growth and cohesion, Lucas (2008) writes that the Palestinian and Israeli conflict caused a rift to form between Jordan's government and pro-Palestinian militias within the state. Haddad (2013) adds that the U.S. invasion in Iraq caused a "security vacuum" that aggravated sectarian rifts. Considering these different arguments, it's obvious that international factors can exasperate already tense situations within countries, making nation building more difficult because of clashing identities.

The final crucial aspect of the literature is whether a regime co-opts diverse groups or excludes them from discourse, which can have positive or negative impacts on forming national unity and ultimately state-building. This is a recurring theme from the works of Haddad (2013), Lucas (2008), Hinnebusch (2003), and several others. When it comes to Jordan, Alon (2007) makes the case that the regime was able to bring about a peaceful ruling bargain with tribes by slowly integrating them into the nation-state. Haddad (2013) writes that sectarian differences in Iraq caused actors to accuse the state of enacting policies that favored a rival group. Examining the literature, it's clear that regimes, and ultimately domestic policy, can help determine how groups perceive the state's legitimacy. If there appears to be corruption or favoritism, this could easily undermine the ability of the state to maintain its sovereignty. On the other hand, if a state can promote policies that are acceptable to its entire people, it may help form some national unity.

Considering these different trains of thought on sectarian and ethnic identities, as well as the role of outside actors in nation building, there are some

important implications that arise. A critical take-away from the literature is that a variety of factors work together to help solidify national unity or endanger it.

Several scholars have pointed to a state's domestic policies as being potential points of conflict that can agitate rifts between tribal or religious groups. Policies that allow for inclusion will probably be the most successful. But, the literature also shows that states like Iraq and Syria have suffered from foreign involvement in their internal affairs, which definitely increased friction between sectarian groups within the state. What's more, if international powers themselves drew the artificial borders around incredibly diverse and otherwise hostile groups of people, they may be responsible for the sectarian and ethnic strife that ensues.

With this in mind, I will focus on the topics of artificial borders and foreign involvement, which is not to discount the role of domestic policies. By zeroing in on these two areas, I hope to trace the consequences of outside actors in Middle Eastern affairs and provide a big-picture analysis of how these states have been helped or hindered by foreign actors. To answer my research question and show what sets Jordan apart, I'll need to identify the differences and similarities between Iraq, Syria, and Jordan on these particular issues. First, to understand how these factors influence a state's stability, it's necessary to understand each state's origins.

### Iraq, Syria, and Jordan: Geography and Diversity

A look at the history of Iraq, Syria, and Jordan reveals that their territories were mapped out at the same time, giving them a shared history. Geographically speaking, each state is formed from districts that were once portions of the Ottoman Empire. The physical territory of Jordan makes it an important regional player,

acting as a buffer between Israel and hostile Arab nations. Syria and Iraq, however, are much more vast and in Syria's case, all the major cities lie along its borders, which causes residents to form ties with other nations. Another significant detail is each state's level of diversity. While Iraq and Syria have Arab and Kurdish populations, as well as Sunni and Shia Muslims within their borders, Jordan has a much more homogeneous population. Before delving into the religious and cultural identities present within each state, it's vital to analyze the history of each state's artificial borders.

After the Ottoman Empire was defeated in World War I, their territory was split up between the French and the British. France received control of Syria, while Iraq and present-day Jordan were given to the British. This was hashed out in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which was kept secret at the time. International powers were especially interested in the economic and strategic advantages that would come from controlling the Middle East. Specifically, Britain sought to secure access to the Suez Canal as well as new oil markets in the region.<sup>8</sup> While the strategies used to govern each state during the British and French Mandates will be covered later in this analysis, it's important to consider the implications of where artificial borders were carved out by foreign powers.

Today, Iraq and Syria have roughly the same artificial borders that were delineated after World War I in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Iraq is situated between

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<sup>8</sup> Bew, John. "The tragic cycle: from Sykes-Picot to the rise of Isis--the western powers and the Middle East." *New Statesman* [1996] 15 Aug. 2014: 22+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 5 June 2015.

Iran, Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, with a Kurdish population in the north, a Shiite population in the middle of the country, and a Sunni population in the south.<sup>9</sup> It is about the size of California.<sup>10</sup> While the Tigris and Euphrates rivers snake across Iraq's interior, the southwest portion of Iraq is primarily sparsely populated desert.<sup>11</sup> The northern most part of Iraq does have something of a natural border, with the Zagros Mountains helping to mark the territory between Iraq, Turkey, and Iran.<sup>12</sup> With only one seemingly natural border, Iraq's government must try to "hold together a state... composed of Kurds and Sunnis and Shiite Arabs, seething with a well articulated degree of ethnic and sectarian consciousness," according to author Robert D. Kaplan.<sup>13</sup> Somewhat similar to Iraq, Syria has a vast, open desert, but its largest cities are located close to its borders, leading to strong ties between interstate communities.

About the size of Washington State, Syria is characterized by extensive deserts and cities along its borders.<sup>14</sup> Although Syria is primarily desert, it does back up against the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Most of Syria's large cities lie along the coastline or near the Euphrates River, which winds into Syria from Iraq. Since many of Syria's cities are in close proximity to other states, their inhabitants

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<sup>9</sup> Shelley, Fred M. *Nation Shapes. The Story behind the World's Borders.* ACL-CLIO, LLC. 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 409.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 409.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 409.

<sup>13</sup> "Interview: Robert D. Kaplan On How Geography Affects The Fate Of Nations." Radio Free Europe, September 11, 2012, Features sec. Accessed June 8, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Shelley, Fred M. *Nation Shapes. The Story behind the World's Borders.* ACL-CLIO, LLC. 2013., 443.

end up forming close ties with those across the border.<sup>15</sup> “These cities often have historical, social, and commercial ties with hinterlands across national borders...” writes authors Bassam Haddad and Ella Wind, citing cities like Aleppo, which is tied to Lebanon, Deraa, tied to Jordan, and Deir Ezzor, which is close to Iraq.<sup>16</sup> Syria’s southernmost border extends from Iraq to Jordan before running into Israel and going north. Syria’s boundaries with Israel have been contested over the past half a century, with Golan Heights, once a part of Syria, now occupied by Israel. Like Syria, Jordan’s borders are similarly artificial and “porous,” but the state benefits from its regional position.<sup>17</sup>

Jordan is arguably the most artificial of all three states, with borders that cross geometrically through uninhabited desert. The approximate size of Indiana, Jordan is sandwiched between Israel to the west, Saudi Arabia to the east, Syria to the north, and Iraq in the north east.<sup>18</sup> Jordan’s most important role may be serving as a buffer between Arab nations and Israel. In a report from the Congressional Research Service, author Jeremy Sharp describes Jordan’s strategic importance to the United States, writing, “Jordan’s geographic position, wedged between Israel, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, has made it vulnerable to the strategic designs of more powerful neighbors, but has also given Jordan an important role as a buffer between

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<sup>15</sup> Haddad, Bassam. Wind, Ella. “The Fragmented State of the Syrian Opposition.” *Beyond the Arab Spring*. Oxford University Press. 2014., 404.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 404.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>18</sup> Shelley, Fred M. *Nation Shapes. The Story behind the World’s Borders*. ACL-CLIO, LLC. 2013., 417.

these potential adversaries.” Besides having a strategic location, Jordan also benefits from a relatively cohesive society.

Speaking to each state’s religious and cultural composition, Iraq and Syria contain diverse ethnicities and religious sects, while Jordan is primarily comprised of various tribal identities that share the same religion. To be more specific, ethnically, Iraq is 75-80% Arab and about 20% Kurdish.<sup>19</sup> Around 60% of Iraqis are Shia, 35% are Sunni, and there is a small Christian community that makes up about 1% of the overall population.<sup>20</sup> In Syria, “one of the most diverse [countries] in the Arab world,” 90% of the population is Arab. Kurds make up the rest of the population.<sup>21</sup> In regards to religion, Syria is roughly 87% Muslim, of which 74% are Sunni. Alawites, Shiites, and Christians make up the rest of society.<sup>22</sup> Jordan is much less diverse, being 98% Arab and 97% Muslim, predominantly Sunni.<sup>23</sup> With these statistics in mind, it’s apparent that Jordan has a much more unified identity in terms of ethnicity and religion. Iraq and Syria, on the other hand, contain competing Muslim sects, as well as Kurdish populations that don’t identify with their home country and are somewhat autonomous.

There are several ramifications for Syria, Iraq, and Jordan when it comes to their geography and the divergent identities within their borders. First, all three states consist of large swaths of open desert that leads to their borders being hard

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<sup>19</sup> "World Factbook." Central Intelligence Agency. Accessed June 9, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Bassam Haddad and Ella Wind. “The Fragmented State of the Syrian Opposition.” *Beyond the Arab Spring*. Oxford University Press. 2014., 405.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 405.

to control and mostly artificial in nature. Second, both Iraq and Syria have sectarian rifts that extend into recent history, with Iraq, as well as Syria dealing with Sunni and Shia conflicts. Turning to Jordan, it's obvious that they benefit from a relatively cohesive ethnic and religious identity. Almost all Jordanians are Sunnis and their geographic placement makes them indispensable to world powers.

#### Foreign Involvement: Then and Now

Iraq, Syria, and Jordan have very different histories when it comes to foreign involvement. In Iraq, Britain installed a Sunni minority into government positions, continually favoring one group over another. At the same time, France's "divide and conquer" strategy in newly formed Syria created a situation where sects were granted privileges in order to give them the upper-edge, creating rifts that persisted for decades until present day. In Jordan, it appears that during the British Mandate, the British were able to slowly incorporate tribal groups into the ruling bargain, ultimately making a more peaceful state. Before pinpointing the differences and similarities between each state, it's crucial to consider Iraq's trajectory, which was negatively affected by the British Mandate and today suffers from the Sunni-Shia divide, also agitated by international actors.

#### British Mandate in Iraq

During the time of the British Mandate, effective from 1914 to 1932, the British undertook a plan to help form Iraq into a sovereign state but ultimately failed to include all groups in the ruling bargain. The Mandate took effect in Iraq after the Ottomans were defeated, giving Great Britain the ability to pass laws, raise

revenue, and appoint officials.<sup>24</sup> “By the time of the 1920 mandate, Iraqi nationalism outweighed pro-British feeling,” author Jonathan Kandell writes, alluding to the growing conflict brewing between the British and the Iraqis, who wanted control of their own country. Britain finally acquiesced to growing protests and calls for independence, putting Iraq’s first King, Faisal, into power in 1921. Although Faisal was technically installed through a referendum, the process was described as a “rigged plebiscite,” schemed by the British.<sup>25</sup> A Sunni, Faisal came from Mecca, which is now a part of Saudi Arabia, having little knowledge of Iraq’s complex cultures and dialect.<sup>26</sup> Kandell writes that throughout his time as King - a brief ten years - Faisal “double dealed” the British, supporting them behind the scenes, while publicly decrying the continued meddling in Iraqi government. Ultimately, British involvement in Iraqi affairs did little to help form a stable country or an inclusive government.

Britain’s legacy under the Mandate system is one of favoring the Sunni minority over the majority Shiite population, hindering the state’s ability to form a cohesive national identity and gain stability. “Iraq’s ability to self-govern was damaged under the Mandate,” writes Usha Natarajan, pointing to the collusion between British officials and the Sunni Iraqi elite, who did not represent the public at large and made little attempts to include other sectarian groups within the

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<sup>24</sup> Kandell, Jonathan. 2003. "Iraq's Unruly Century." *Smithsonian* 34, no. 2: 44. *Historical Abstracts*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 8, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Natarajan, Usha. 2011. "Creating and Recreating Iraq: Legacies of the Mandate System in Contemporary Understandings of Third World Sovereignty." *Leiden Journal Of International Law* 24, no. 4: 799-822. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 8, 2015)., 808.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 808.



country.<sup>27</sup> It appears that Britain never truly intended to create a full-fledged, well functioning state, as indicated by Sir Henry Dobbs, a British High Commissioner to Iraq during the time of the Mandate. "My hope is that, even without our advice, Iraq may now be so well established, that she may be able to rub along in a corrupt, inefficient, oriental sort of way, something better than she was under Turkish rule," Hobbs wrote in a letter to the Colonial Office in 1929.<sup>28</sup> Switching focus to present today, the United States' role in the Iraq War and the subsequent civil war, also destabilized the country.

#### Iraq Today: The United States and The Iraq War.

Even today, Iraq's stability is threatened by international powers. The most glaring example of this in recent history is the Iraq War, which removed Saddam Hussein from power and replaced his leadership with a democratic but fragmented and contentious government. "The cardinal sin of Americans was to create the conditions for chaos," writes author George Packer. One way that the American government created the "conditions for chaos," was by co-opting members of Saddam's opposition in the lead-up to the 2003 war. Although this may have been the easy route, these individuals were not necessarily representative of Iraq as a whole and have yet to relinquish the powers bestowed on them by the United States.<sup>29</sup> Another damaging strategy that the United States employed when invading

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 810.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Dobbs's letter to Shuckburgh at the Colonial Office, 28 December 1929, C0730/150/12, 1929 Iraq, 4-5.

<sup>29</sup> al-Oraibi, Mina. 2013. "Iraq: A Decade of Lost Opportunities." *Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 2: 77-89. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 8, 2015), 79.

Iraq was dismantling key aspects of the Iraqi state, including the military, police, and government.

By destroying the Iraqi state apparatus, the United States destabilized the country and created a security vacuum that allowed groups like ISIS to thrive. The United States' "De-Baathification of Iraqi Society" meant removing all Ba'ath officials (about 100,00 people) from government positions, ultimately increasing instability.<sup>30</sup> "This decision effectively eliminated the leadership and top technical capacity for universities, hospitals, transportation, electricity and communications," writes author James Pfiffner. In a state with no security force outside of the U.S. army, militias were formed to protect neighborhoods and certain sects.<sup>31</sup> While the disbanding of the Iraqi army gave room for militia groups to flourish, it also disenfranchised huge swaths of the Iraqi population and created a well-armed insurgency that now had reason to hate the United States.<sup>32</sup> Many former military officers are now helping lead ISIS. "ISIL, as an organization, could not exist without former Baathists," Iraqi analyst Sajad Jiyad at the al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning in Bagdad told Canada's National Post. Jiyad estimates that about 25 of ISIS' 40 leaders over the past two years were once a part of Saddam's Ba'ath party. With this in mind, it's clear that the United States' actions during the war ultimately led to increased instability for the Iraqi people.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>32</sup> Pfiffner, James. "US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army." Intelligence and National Security, February 1, 2010, 76-85.

Tracing Iraq's history to today, foreign involvement has had negative effects on the states' security and internal cohesion. While under the British Mandate, the minority Sunni population was favored by the British and elevated to positions of power within government. Even though Iraq was eventually granted independence, there was little national unity and no hope for democracy because of sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia. When the United States overthrew Saddam Hussein's regime, they may have toppled a dictator, but disbanding the Iraqi army and gutting state institutions led to a disintegration of the state and security. Under these circumstances, sectarian strife boiled out of control, culminating in Iraq's Civil War that persisted from the United States' departure in 2011 and is raging to this day, especially with groups like ISIS threatening many of Iraq's cities.

### Syria and the French Mandate

Like Iraq, Syria was formed after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. However, unlike Iraq, Syria was given to France, who had a "divide and conquer" strategy when it came to sectarian identities.<sup>33</sup> It was this divide and conquer strategy that "eroded the ties among Syria's ethnic groups," ultimately making it difficult to create one national identity.<sup>34</sup> During the French Mandate, Syria was comprised of Sunnis, who supported Arab Nationalism, and "heterodox" Muslim Alawite, Druze, and Ismaili communities.<sup>35</sup> Fearing the rise of Arab Nationalism, the French co-opted

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<sup>33</sup> Fildis, Ayse Tekdal. "Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria." *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 148-156. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 8, 2015), 148.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 148

the Druze and Alawite populations, giving them their own separate, protected areas throughout the 1920s and into the 40s. Separate quasi-states were also created in Aleppo and Damascus, also “designed to obstruct the progress of Syrian nation unity.”<sup>36</sup> With this favoritism in mind, author Ayse Fildis writes, “When the last French troops withdrew in April 1946, one of the greatest obstacles to political integration after independence was regionalism.”<sup>37</sup> After the French Mandate ended, control was given to the Sunni elite, who immediately went about trying to consolidate state power. They put an end to Alawite and Druze independence and immediately inflamed sectarian conflict.<sup>38</sup> Fildis summarizes the role of the French in fragmenting Syria and contributing to sectarian conflict when he writes, “Minority consciousness, reinforced by a combination of geography, religious differences, communal segregation and regional separatism, had a damaging impact on Syrian political life even long after the mandate.”<sup>39</sup>

Looking back at Syria’s history under the French Mandate, several things stand out that can help explain the present crisis in the region. First, the French favored minorities, giving them their own separate communities. “The establishment of French rule after World War I benefited the 'Alawis more than any

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<sup>36</sup> Fildis, Ayse Tekdal. 2011. "The Troubles in Syria: Spawned by French Divide and Rule." *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 4: 129-139. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 4, 2015), 134.

<sup>37</sup> Fildis, Ayse Tekdal. "Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria." *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 148-156. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 8, 2015), 149.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>39</sup> Fildis, Ayse Tekdal. 2011. "The Troubles in Syria: Spawned by French Divide and Rule." *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 4: 129-139. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 4, 2015), 135.

other community," writes Daniel Pipes. Although Sunnis dominated Syria for a time after the Mandate ended, Alawites were ultimately able to regain their positions of privilege through the Ba'ath party and a series of coups.<sup>40</sup> Current Syrian President Bashar Al Assad is Alawi, as are top Syrian officials within the regime. Therefore, we can trace the sectarian dynamics back to the time of the French Mandate, which ultimately primed the Alawite minority and the Sunni majority for the conflict that's still raging today.

### Syria Today: Proxy War and Inaction

Presently, international and regional actors are contributing to Syria's instability by engaging in a proxy war within Syrian borders and failing to protect Syrian citizens from human rights abuses. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, over 300,000 people have died since the Civil War began in 2011. International actors like Iran, Russia, and Venezuela are propping up the Assad regime by sending supplies and arms.<sup>41</sup> Iran may be Syria's closest ally, as Syria presents a way for the Iranian government to send supplies to Hezbollah in Lebanon, who the U.S. considers a terrorist organization.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are working to arm and protect members of the opposition, including the Free Syrian Army.<sup>43</sup> On a more global scale, the United Nations Security Council

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<sup>40</sup> Pipes, Daniel. "The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria." 1989. Accessed June 9, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Diehl, Jackson. 2012. "Lines in the Sand." *World Affairs* 175, no. 1: 7-16. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 9, 2015), 8.

<sup>42</sup> "CFR Backgrounders: Hezbollah." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed June 9, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Diehl, Jackson. 2012. "Lines in the Sand." *World Affairs* 175, no. 1: 7-16. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 9, 2015), 8.

has been largely ineffective at taking action against Syria because of vetoes from Russia and China. In fact, in May of 2014, both countries vetoed a resolution that would have referred Syria to the International Criminal Court, which could have further investigated the allegations of human rights abuses within the country.<sup>44</sup> Among the allegations is that Assad used chemical weapons against civilians in the summer of 2014. The UN investigated, but wasn't able to confirm that Assad was behind the attack.<sup>45</sup>

Considering Syria's history and the current civil war, it's evident that while the French may have contributed to Syrian instability by favoring Alawites and other heterodox communities, international actors today are failing to act at all, or are actually making matters worse by engaging in a proxy war on Syrian soil. The French sowed the seeds of sectarian strife in Syria by favoring minority communities and separating them from the Sunni majority, as they did with the Alawites. These cleavages persist to this day, with the Alawite Assad regime struggling to stay in power in the midst of a civil war with most of the Sunni population. Despite the alleged human rights abuses taking place in Syria, the international community has been slow to step in. Actors like Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia may actually be making matters worse in Syria by engaging in a proxy war and sending weapons and supplies to both sides.

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<sup>44</sup> "Russia, China Block Security Council Referral of Syria to International Criminal Court." UN News Center. May 22, 2014. Accessed June 9, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> "UN Report on Chemical Weapons Use in Syria." Council on Foreign Relations. December 12, 2013. Accessed June 9, 2015.

## Jordan: British Mandate

Jordan's history under British rule was markedly different than Iraq and Syria's in several areas. First, Jordan's state formation under British Mandate was unique in that it allowed for the slow integration of tribal identities. Initially placed under British Mandate in 1920, Jordan benefited from lax British rule. "Britain attached little strategic importance to Transjordan... The perception dictated minimal intervention in internal affairs of administration," writes author Alon Yoav.<sup>46</sup> Under these circumstances, Emir Abdullah bin al-Hussein, who would eventually become Jordan's first King, was given free reign in how to deal with the tribes. Emir Abdullah was friendly towards the British, a skilled leader, and had strong ties to the tribes.<sup>47</sup> Under his leadership, the tribes were able to maintain a level of autonomy in Jordan's rural areas. It wasn't until the mid-1920s that Britain began to consolidate power in Jordan's central government, spurred by a revolt led by the Balqa' tribes.<sup>48</sup> But, they were able to do this without inflaming tensions because of a persistent drought and world Depression, the effects of which forced tribal leaders to rely on the government for supplies and economic assistance.<sup>49</sup>

To summarize, the ruling Kingdom of Jordan has sought out and co-opted tribes since Jordan's time under the British Mandate. The lenient rule of the British allowed for King Abdullah to shape a ruling bargain that incorporated the tribal

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<sup>46</sup> Alon, Yoav. 2006. "Tribes and State-Formation in Mandatory Transjordan." *Civil Wars* 8, no. 1: 66-82. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 9, 2015),69.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 71.

identities that were present during Jordan's creation. This "partnership" between the state and tribes was one in which "authorities constantly had to negotiate their policies" in relation to the tribes, sometimes "withdrawing them altogether."<sup>50</sup> Because of the British's initial lack of interest, they were not strong enough to force tribal leaders to acquiesce to their desires. Instead, they had to slowly and carefully bring them into the fold. Coupled with the timing of the state's power consolidation, British rule had the unique effect of increasing stability for future generations.

#### Jordan Today: Ally to Israel, United States

Jordan is an important ally to both Israel and the United States, which has definitely helped increase its stability. With continued fighting between Israel and Palestinian opposition groups, Jordan plays a key role by not only protecting Israel from other Arab nations, but also by providing a home to nearly 2 million Palestinian refugees.<sup>51</sup> Outside of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, Jordan's small size and lack of resources has made it dependent on aid from countries like the United States since its creation. Since 1951, the United States has provided economic aid, amounting to a total of \$15.83 billion in 2015.<sup>52</sup> Jordan's friendly relationship with the United States led to their involvement in the air strikes against ISIS, now termed "Operation Inherent Resolve."<sup>53</sup> Their role in the fighting increased in the aftermath of the release of an Islamic State video that showed downed

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<sup>50</sup> Alon, Yoav. *Making of Jordan : Tribes, Colonialism and the Modern State*. London, GBR: I.B. Tauris, 2007., 148.

<sup>51</sup> Sharp, Jeremy. "Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations." Congressional Research Service, 2015., 1.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 1.



Jordanian fighter pilot, Lieutenant Moath al Kassabeh, being burned alive by ISIS fighters.<sup>54</sup> In addition to economic aid, Jordan also receives military assistance from the United States. Granted Major non-NATO Ally status in 1996, Jordan is able to receive excess equipment and training from U.S. forces.<sup>55</sup> Considering the large amounts of aid that Jordan receives from the United States, it's evident that it has played a significant role in their stability.

Looking at the trajectory of Jordan's history, it's apparent that their strategic location to foreign powers and willingness to cooperate has led to a good deal of support and stability. Under the British Mandate, Jordan was given the time and space to incorporate tribal identities into the state's ruling bargain. Abdullah also played an important role because of his willingness to work with the British and in turn, the British benefited from his expertise in tribal affairs. The United States became a strong ally of the Hashemite Kingdom in the 1950's and is still a major economic supporter to this day. In return for economic and military support, the Jordanian regime acts as an ally to Israel and is helping in the fight against ISIS.

### Conclusion

Everything considered, it's clear that Iraq, Syria, and Jordan diverge on several points. First, looking at each state's geography and ethnic diversity, Syria and Iraq encompass a more diverse set of identities than Jordan. Jordan is comprised of Sunnis, while Iraq and Syria both have large populations of Shiites. The Shiite and Sunni conflict has been a constant aspect of both state's history, but they

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 13.

saw this divide grow under the French and British Mandates. The rifts played upon by the British and the French still reverberate to this day, seen in the Alawite regime of Bashar Al Assad, the Iraqi Civil War, the rise of the Islamic State, and the Shia and Sunni conflict continuing in the region. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the lack of heavy-handedness by the British in Jordan gave King Abdullah the ability to integrate tribal identities into the ruling bargain. This helped contribute to overall national unity. Jordan still has international support, while Iraq and Syria are lacking in resources and the ability to maintain their borders. Even today, foreign powers are feeding the instability by dismantling state institutions in Iraq during the U.S. invasion and by failing to intervene in the Syrian crisis.

While this analysis demonstrates linkages between the artificial borders drawn by international powers, the continued involvement of outside actors in domestic affairs, and each state's level of stability, it does not account for internal, domestic policies enacted by the ruling regimes. This is definitely a limitation of this analysis and would be a worthwhile line of inquiry in a later essay. Regimes themselves can implement policies aimed at including diverse ethnic and religious groups into the ruling bargain, which can help them achieve stability. It could be argued that another reason for Jordan's success is their internal strategies of dealing with tribal groups, while leadership in the Iraqi and Syrian governments have failed to fully incorporate all their citizens into their ruling bargains. However, solely examining the international factors and physical boundaries of these states provides a less complicated view of their similarities and differences.

To return to the main idea of this essay, governments in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan were mostly foreign creations to begin with. Perhaps national identity, a prerequisite for democracy, cannot form until the people who actually inhabit the territory can build a government organically, as opposed to outsiders who enflame sectarian conflict and don't make inclusive government a priority. It must be said that the artificial boundaries imposed on the Middle East by foreign powers may not be conducive to stability. While there may be a need for international community to intervene in the Syrian Civil War, especially considering the casualties and alleged human rights abuses, we should be open to the remapping of these state's territories by the citizens themselves.

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