Hell on Earth: The Fall of Syria and the Rise of ISIS

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“When a society collapses into anarchy and violence, civilians inevitably take matters into their own hands … In that kind of environment, radical ideologies are almost guaranteed to take hold”.

The aforementioned quote from “Hell on Earth: The Fall of Syria and the Rise of ISIS” rightfully sums up how the situation in Syria got to where it is now, along with its repercussions. Directed by Sebastian Junger and Nick Quested, the documentary vacillates between the micro and macro levels by first narrating the harrowing experiences of two families displaced by the ensuing violence in Syria and then by delving into the rise of endless non-state actors as a consequence of bitter opposition faced by the Assad regime. The following essay will use the mainstream theories of international relations, i.e., realism, Marxism, and constructivism, to undertake a critical analysis of the documentary and understand the nature of the interstate conflict in Syria (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

As per the insights gathered from various experts in the field that form the bulk of the documentary, the many-headed paramilitary behemoth came to the fore as an aftermath of the use of force on innocent Syrian protesters and the conditions they were kept in: President Obama’s failed attempt to rein in Assad even after his use of chemical weapons, which was deemed as crossing the red line; the policy of de-Baathification whereby the Sunnis in Iraq were completely disempowered after the US invasion of Iraq (2003); and the issue of foreign interference whereby the USA and its allies opposed the Assad regime and Iran and Russia supported it. In line with the reasons outlined above, the following rubrics will provide a theoretical analysis of ISIS’s war against Syria and Iraq (United Nations Security Council, 2024).

Although realism and its variants fail to acknowledge non-state or transnational actors in their analysis, the concepts of anarchy, real politics, and rationality can be applied here. As the documentary depicts, ISIS did not emerge out of a vacuum. Instead, it used the anarchic system (absence of an overarching authority) to its advantage in expanding its influence in both Syria and Iraq. Moreover, ISIS perfectly fits the realist description of power politics, whereby ISIS extends its

control over natural resources and territory alike, as a consequence of which it has become a force to be reckoned with. Furthermore, ISIS is also a rational actor because it is fighting for a bigger objective, i.e., building a state based on Islamic principles. In addition to the geographic element, ISIS is gaining other features of a state as well, like the development of a sophisticated bureaucracy and issuance of passports. Ultimately, ISIS might conform itself to the role of a state whose ultimate objective would be survival on a self-help basis (U.S. Central Command, 2024).

Conversely, Marxism suggests that the underlying reason for intrastate wars can be traced back to the capitalist system that produces class conflict, which ultimately fuels prominent uprisings and revolutionary movements by the working class against the bourgeoisie. Just like any political actor inspired by Marxist rhetoric, ISIS strives to hasten the cataclysm that would annihilate the old liberal order to usher in a new one. ISIS's strategy in this regard is dialectical, whereby its atrocious conduct is supposed to give rise to a far-right anti-Muslim backlash in the liberal democracies of the West so that the downtrodden Muslims residing in those states take up arms against their host governments. The ultimate result would be the weakening of the Western bloc and the rise of resurgent Islam as a triumphant global power. Based on such a premise, ISIS has waged wars in areas that would give it easy access to large amounts of wealth for sustenance. For example, its key battlefields include Aleppo, Mosul, Sinjar, Falluja, etc.

Lastly, the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, as shown by the latter half of the documentary, can be analyzed through a constructivist lens, which emphasizes the role of identity along with other non-material factors like values, ideas and norms. International politics is a manifestation of an agent's actions that are shaped by their specific identities and interests. In the case of ISIS, the Arab Spring, based on liberal values of freedom, democracy, and political participation, instilled a new identity among the Syrian populace. In the face of a changing structure, the Assad regime also acquired a new identity as a legitimate ruler unaffected by the massive protests that ultimately resulted in the brutal repression of his people. Such a wave of violence forced the protestors to resort to subnational identities along sectarian lines, whereby the Syrian people entered into new intersubjective relationships. This is how ISIS emerged with an anti-Shia ideology and also expanded its influence in Iraq because of this ideology, which appealed to the already marginalized Sunni faction residing there (United Nations Security Council, 2024).

To conclude, "Hell on Earth: The Fall of Syria and the Rise of ISIS," with its authoritative tone and objective take, forms an invaluable prologue to the Syrian civil war. Both Junger and Quested brilliantly cover the ISIS fiasco from various viewpoints and succeed in capturing the nerve-racking violence, social and political repercussions, and, most importantly, the human toll brought about as a consequence of the Syrian civil war (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). Moreover, the documentary also does not spare the West and its role in the formation of ISIS. However, the rise of ISIS and the atrocities carried out by it, some of which form the larger chunk of the documentary, prompt the viewer to ask a few questions towards the end. Could ISIS's ascent to power have been deflected in the first place? Could it be predicted that the annihilation of ISIS's ancestor, al-Qaeda, would essentially sow the seeds for the rise of another more deadly version of

itself? Or is the United States of America to be held solely responsible for choosing radical policy options over others that could have thwarted ISIS's emergence or at least kept it from becoming a force to be reckoned with?

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