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How has the involvement of the United States in Middle Eastern affairs contributed to the growth of radical Islam, as seen with groups such as ISIS?

**Introduction**

It is no secret that the United States is constantly involved with the affairs of numerous countries all over the world. Due to regular tension and conflict within the Middle East, beginning long before the 21st Century, the region placed itself on the global stage soon after the creation of Israel, which led to several wars, starting with the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. These conflicts only continued, with the United States being a major player since the formation of Israel. United States involvement only grew more, as seen after the Soviet Union Invasion of Afghanistan. Significant Cold War tensions led to massive hostility, seen with the Iranian Hostage Crisis. The United States has seemingly always held some power within the Middle East, from the mid-Twentieth Century. Recently, the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, (ISIS), has grown exponentially in the Middle East, becoming a serious threat to much of Europe, as well as the United States. The intention of this paper is to try and analyze the causes and effects of United States action within the Middle East, to help identify the link between radical Islam, and actions of the United States in the Middle East. I believe that the United States' previous involvement in the Middle East has helped give rise to groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. Through various actions, conflicts, and relationships with other

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foreign nations, I believe that the U.S. has inadvertently assisted various Islamic extremist groups in growing throughout the Twentieth and Twenty First Century.

**Review of Relevant Literature**

ISIS is not attached to any significant other extremist terror groups. It has grown mostly on its own, and does not share the same beliefs of Al-Qaeda, the terror group responsible for the 9/11 Terror Attacks. (Cronin, 2015) Significant differences can be identified between groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, an important distinction to make. “ISIS... boasts some 30,000 fighters, holds territory in both Iraq and Syria, maintains extensive military capabilities, controls lines of communication, commands infrastructure, funds itself, and engages in sophisticated military operations.” (Cronin, 2015) This is worth noting because it is very important to identify differences between more well-known terror groups like Al-Qaeda, and rapidly growing ones like ISIS. Comparing the two groups is almost useless, because both groups grew at completely different times, under completely different conditions, and operate in two completely different ways. Al-Qaeda came to be soon after the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan, when the country was thrust into chaos after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. (Cronin, 2015.) ISIS, on the other hand, grew “thanks to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. In its earliest incarnation, it was just one of a number of Sunni extremist groups fighting U.S. forces and attacking Shiite civilians in an attempt to foment a sectarian civil war. At that time, it was called al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and its leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had pledged allegiance to bin Laden. Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. airstrike in 2006, and soon after, AQI was nearly wiped out when Sunni tribes decided to partner with the Americans to confront the jihadists.” (Cronin,

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2015) I believe that it is extremely important to recognize the differences between the creation of both of these groups, as it allows me to trace the where United States involvement led to ISIS growing. “AQI renewed itself inside U.S.-run prisons in Iraq, where insurgents and terrorist operatives connected and formed networks--and where the group's current chief and self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, first distinguished himself as a leader.” This quote from Cronin clearly states that the United States played a direct role in the initial creation of ISIS. Due to the retaliation of the United States after the 9/11 Terror Attacks, many Islamic extremists were able to communicate with one another due to their incarceration. If the United States did not invade the region soon after 9/11, it is possible to consider that ISIS may not have formed, as many of its current groups and leaders would not be able to communicate and network with one another during imprisonment. I believe that Cronin is an extremely credible source, as she is an International Affairs professor at George Mason University, and was the Academic Director of Studies for the Changing Character of War program, located at Oxford University. Cronin is a reliable, knowledgeable source that has significant experience with war and international affairs.

Another implication of the United States’ withdrawal from the Middle East is that the Middle East is composed of Sunni and Shiite Muslims. These two different beliefs that belong within the Islam religion mark a gap that possibly cannot be bridged, due to the fact that Sunnis and Shiites are vehemently opposed to one another. Soon after the United States withdrew, the Prime Minister of Iraq pursued an extremely “hard-line pro-Shiite agenda, further alienating Sunni Arabs throughout the country.” This created a dangerous issue, as many of ISIS’ members, leaders, and supporters are known to be Sunnis. (Cronin, 2015) Even though the United States

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inadvertently helped ISIS form, through allowing members to communicate with one another in prison, it unintentionally helped the group gain popularity with Sunnis with its withdrawal from the region. The rift between Sunnis and Shiites is a considerable issue, as the nature surrounding the rift between the two groups allows ISIS to gain the support of an entire religious group. This is notable because ISIS claims to be fighting a religious war. If a group from an entire religion shares the same view, ISIS then gains countless supporters.

The United States' previous involvement with the Iraqi Government also has helped give growth to ISIS. To help wage its war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States helped train the Iraqi Military. Unfortunately, the Iraqi Military has retreated from countless battles against ISIS, allowing ISIS to capture military equipment. "ISIS is now led by well-trained, capable former Iraqi military leaders who know U.S. techniques and habits because Washington helped train them. And after routing Iraqi army units and taking their U.S.-supplied equipment, ISIS is now armed with American tanks, artillery, armored Humvees, and mine-resistant vehicles." (Conin, 2015) Again, the United States inadvertently helped ISIS grow, by training the Iraqi Military. The Iraqi Military was not able to keep a hold over the region, and its numerous retreats have led to ISIS taking control of powerful, advanced military technology held by the United States.

ISIS has also grown in a much different way from other groups, such as Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda attempted to come across as intelligent and scholarly. It wanted to have a positive image amongst the public, which has essentially caused it to come across as "deeply unsexy." (Conin, 2015) ISIS, however, has taken a different approach to recruiting its members. "The group attracts followers yearning for not only religious righteousness but also adventure, personal power, and a sense of self and community... The group's brutal violence attracts

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attention, demonstrates dominance, and draws people to the action.” (Conin, 2015) Since ISIS has been able to place itself on the forefront of the global stage, it is constantly gaining more and more recruits, who are completely dedicated to the cause. “In short, ISIS offers short-term, primitive gratification. It does not radicalize people in ways that can be countered by appeals to logic. Teenagers are attracted to the group without even understanding what it is, and older fighters just want to be associated with ISIS' success.” (Conin, 2015) The United States hasn't been able to effectively combat ISIS propaganda in any significant way, which has allowed ISIS to draw recruits from all across the globe. Many young people are sickly attracted to the violence and brutality promised by ISIS, but don't exactly understand what the group stands for. Since the United States has not been able significantly impact the propaganda produced by ISIS, or stem the flow of new recruits, ISIS has only continued to grow in the Middle East. The growth of ISIS has been so rapid partially because the United States has not been able to stage a full-scale attack against the group. ISIS has been able to operate relatively unharassed, which has enabled it to take more territory and continue to grow. The United States must come to terms with the fact that it simply has to involve itself in the Middle East once more in order to effectively stem the growth of radical Islamist groups, especially one as dangerous and capable as ISIS. ISIS does have the ability to strike across the globe, as it holds significant resources and has many, many recruits at its disposal.

Since its extremely rapid expansion, the United States has attempted to mitigate the growth of ISIS through military action, and these actions have been effective to an extent. ISIS has recently been experiencing issues financially, “thanks to coalition airstrikes and other measures that have eroded millions from their finances.” (Associated Press, 2016) This article

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can be proven to be reliable, as it was composed by members of the Associated Press, a nonprofit group that contributes to numerous sources. The Associated Press has been in operation for nearly 170 years, making it more than reliable. It is used by countless well known media outlets, which only adds to its credibility.

Although the United States, as well as the coalition it assists in, have acted in order to curb the growth of ISIS, it is still battling against such rapid expansion. ISIS “built up loyalty among militants with good salaries and honeymoon and baby bonuses,” (Associated Press, 2016). This loyalty is important to note, because even though ISIS is currently going through difficult times financially, many of its militant members will stay loyal, regardless of actions taken against the group. The loyalty is incredibly important, because it fundamentally changes how the United States is able to prevent further growth, especially given that the United States is currently heavily involved in the Middle East.

Since the United States is starting to become more heavily involved within the Middle East once again, in order to halt ISIS, its actions may have further implications across the Middle East. Since the United States has attempted military action inside Syria, there is the possibility that such heavy fighting can “[obliterate] any moderate opposition to his rule and [persuade] the world it faces a stark choice between him and Islamist militants who threaten the West,” (Barnard, 2014). Even though it is very important for the extremely hostile ISIS to be removed, the United States may have to consider the implications of removing the Syrian regime’s threats. The United States is already trying to topple the Syrian regime, and could actually be inadvertently reinforcing it. The removal of ISIS and extremist Syrian rebels clearly could add to the Syrian regime’s power, which could be an unaccounted effect that the US did not consider.

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It is important to consider that the current actions being taken by the United States in the Middle East region could have significant implications in the future. While current actions are necessary, they could have the potential to accelerate growth of a different terror group in the future. There have been several claims that terror groups such as the Taliban originally sprouted after being given aid by United States funding, but no concrete information is available on the subject. It's possible that the United States support of Syrian rebels (McKelvey, 2015), could accidentally create an entirely different extremist group. Ambassador Robert Ford, the "State Department's go-to Syria expert for years," initially wanted to arm more Syrian rebels in 2012, to try and topple the Assad Regime (McKelvey, 2015). The main concern surrounding arming rebels or not was that many U.S. officials, including Ambassador Ford, figured that "extremists will give them [rebels] money and lure them into their organisations," (McKelvey, 2015). This fear does seem rational, but did not entirely consider the idea that rebels could still turn to extremists, even after receiving aid from the United States. However, military aid under the Syrian aid program was halted, once U.S. officials found that the rebels "don't have very good backgrounds," (McKelvey, 2015). These factors are important to consider, because they highlight an action taken by the United States to try and stabilize the Middle East that ultimately turned into something that may have funded Islamic Extremists. It shows that good intentioned acts can have negative outcomes that were unforeseen by the government of the United States.

Involvement in the Middle East has been extremely complex and convoluted for the United States, as there have been many causes and effects ultimately caused by the actions of the United States as a whole. It is not possible to definitively state whether or not the United States has completely caused extremist groups residing in the Middle East to grow rapidly, but without

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a doubt, factors caused by the United States do exist that have affected such extremist groups in one way or another. Actions taken by the United States to halt the growth of ISIS may have numerous unaccounted implications, which can only tie the Middle East to the United States further.

**Methodology**

I will mainly be focusing on historical research carried out through online searches. My research question focuses on the causes and effects of United States actions within the Middle East, making historical research a valid approach to researching and understanding my topic further. The use of historical research will enable me to pinpoint what potential actions could have led to the growth of extremist Islamic groups in the Middle East.

I want to combine historical research with descriptive research because while historical research may provide me with correct information about various actions of the United States in the Middle East, it won't properly describe the effects of those events. Descriptive research will allow me to extrapolate further on events that the United States was involved with, and it will help me draw more connections and conclusions from these actions in order to properly understand the exact causes and effects of various actions of the United States in the Middle East. I initially used historical research to understand the fundamental history and actions of the group ISIS. I felt it was paramount to clearly understand exactly what ISIS is, as a group, and even as an ideology. I didn't think it would be possible to accurately analyze how the United States and ISIS are intertwined without having a reasonable understanding of ISIS. Both types of research should enable me to fully understand what may have caused the rapid growth of Islamic extremist groups residing in the Middle East. I have used various online databases such



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as the SIRS research database and EBSCO database in order to find various information concerning the terrorist group ISIS. I have extensively looked into the history of the United States' actions within the Middle East in order to properly analyze what these actions could have caused. Through my historical research, I was able to uncover how ISIS and Al Qaeda grew so rapidly, and if any action by the United States affected this expansion. My historical findings showed me that there may be a correlation between the United States and growth of radical Islam. I also was able use descriptive research through online databases in order to see exactly what the United States did within the Middle East, and where. These findings helped me connect the growth of radical Islam and the United States, which I then backed up with facts found through my historical research.

The research I undertook is fairly reliable. Most of my sources come from authors who are well versed in the events surrounding the Middle East, or news groups that are well known and highly respected. These sources are reliable, and offer vast information that has been incredibly useful. My main source, a paper written by Audrey Kurth Cronin, is extremely reliable. Cronin has taught at multiple universities, and was the leader of a World Affairs summer course at Oxford University. She has written numerous publications on this subject, and can be considered credible without a doubt. The only research "instrument" I used is the Internet, and its reliability is entirely based on the web pages accessed. I utilized the BBC, the United Kingdom's broadcasting company, which has been found to be extremely credible. The BBC also may offer a different bias than articles written by authors from the United States, because people in the United Kingdom may think differently of Islamic extremists. This is important to take note of, because multiple different biases can help me from having my research too heavily

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affected by the bias of one group, or author. Through avoiding heavy bias my research is allowed to become more thorough and credible. It also enables it to be considered legitimate, which bolsters the claims I make throughout the paper. I mainly found suitable pieces of literature through the SIRS Researcher and EBSCO Database, which are two reliable search engines that only use acceptable, reviewed literature. I feel that my sources and methods are reliable.

**Implications and Limitations**

There are some notable limitations within my methods of research. As many of the operations of the United States within the Middle East are either still classified, or never released, it is impossible to identify a concrete correlation between how ISIS has grown, and how the United States could have affected this expansion. The truth is that some information just isn't available, and may never be available. Many activities carried out by the United States government are covert and secretive by nature, making some aspects of my research infeasible to carry out. I can make educated inferences based off of the information previously discovered through my research, but I cannot make definitive statements. My research has been limited by a lack of absolutely concrete, accurate information, which is an aspect of my methodology I did not originally anticipate. I don't believe that this has invalidated my research in any way, however. Much of the information I did uncover showed me many links between the United States and extremist Islamic groups such as ISIS, enabling me to draw sound connections and conclusions.

**Results**

My research ultimately has uncovered that a connection between radical Islamic groups in the Middle East and United States actions in the Middle East may exist. Through some of its

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heavy military action in the Middle East, the United States may have accidentally given spawn to the group ISIS. The U.S. imprisoned many known terrorists in some of the same prisons, which ultimately allowed the terrorists to converse, and perhaps plan with one another. This definitely can be linked to the creation of ISIS, since the terrorists were able to communicate, befriend, and work with one another. The U.S.-run prisons created an unintentional meeting ground for countless terrorists, who were able to meet up with one another after their release, and ultimately create a terror group following Islam to the extreme. The creation of such terror groups may also be linked to previous U.S. support of various rebel factions across the Middle East. It is speculated that the United States may have inadvertently empowered the terror group, the Taliban, who were responsible for the 9/11 Terror Attacks. A similar situation may be developing as the United States sends assistance and aid to Syrian rebels. Although the future is not predictable, it is not unreasonable to conclude that such assistance to these rebels may create another extremist group. As these rebels have already turned to outright war against the Assad Regime, they could easily turn to violence against various other governments, potentially even the United States. Given that the United States is not entirely opposed to aiding such rebels, the rebels could potentially be armed with modern, military grade weapons and other equipment, as well as various other supplies, such as food, water, and medical supplies. There is no real restriction that holds back the rebels from turning against the United States with the provided equipment, and it must be considered that these rebels could easily view the United States as an enemy, and try to remove United States influence with violence and combat.

My research has also been able to identify key differences between different extremist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, and ISIS. The two groups formed at two entirely different times,

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which has changed how they operate, and what they believe. Al-Qaeda formed during the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan, with mujahideen fighters being funded under Operation Cyclone. (Dreyfuss, Rashid. 2001,2005.) Al-Qaeda formed to battle the Soviet Union, and try to remove it from Afghanistan. While the United States was not directly involved with this war, besides aiding mujahideen combatants, the United States was heavily involved in the Cold War against the USSR. The USSR and United States were constantly attempting to force the countries of the world to pick a side, between the United States and Soviet Union. This eventually caused the Soviet Union to attempt to take over Afghanistan, in an attempt to gain more influence. Since the United States was causing severe tension with the Soviet Union under President Reagan, it can be said that the United States did play a role in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which ultimately spawned Al-Qaeda.

ISIS, however, was created much, much more recently. Its main goal is to establish a religious caliphate, and enforce strict shariah law across the land it has. There is evidence pointing to the idea that ISIS may have partially formed inside U.S. prisons in Iraq, where the United States military keeps numerous terrorists and other dangerous people. The terrorists may have been able to work together, and form some sort of organization, with levels of command, eventually giving rise to ISIS. Instead of trying to solely remove a foreign “invader,” ISIS also wants to create its own nation, of sorts. ISIS essentially wants to provide a safe haven for radical Islam, and wants to ensure that it will not be affected by other nations. These goals differ greatly from groups like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, because while both groups sought to follow strict Islamic Law, they did not attempt to carve out a caliphate from pre-existing nations. Both groups also did not have as much popular support from younger people, which weakened them. ISIS

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grew rapidly, almost overnight, and has strong popular support, with young people joining very often. These differences have not been caused directly by the United States, but the United States could very well have played a role in these key differences. Since the U.S. did not take direct action against ISIS when it grew, being called “JV” by President Obama, ISIS was able to grow undeterred and completely left to its own devices. Since the United States did not directly attempt to stem ISIS’ growth, it was able to make huge strides in gaining more land, resources, and militants. This allows me to conclude that the United States has played a role in the creation and growth of Islamic extremist groups, as seen in ISIS. The United States directly helped Islamic extremists grow by supplying them with various equipment, arming them, and holding them in the same prisons, allowing them to collude and work together. The United States indirectly helped Islamic extremists grow by creating tension with the Soviet Union, causing the USSR to invade Afghanistan, which led to the creation of Al-Qaeda. The United States also indirectly assisted the growth of Islamic extremists by not trying to stop their creation and expansion. The U.S. deemed some groups as unimportant, and left them to their own devices, which helped them grow. In summation, the United States played a notable role, without a doubt, in the growth of Islamic extremists by participating, and not participating in the events that surround the Middle East to this day.

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