THE RISE AND DEMISE OF ISIS: RESHAPING SECURITY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC REALITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This research article investigates the trajectory of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from its emergence to its decline and critically examines the group's profound influence on the socio-economic and security landscapes of the Middle East. It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how ISIS capitalized on political vacuums and social unrest, and what consequences followed for regional states and societies.

Methodology: The study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in content analysis of scholarly sources; policy reports, institutional papers, and peer-reviewed journal articles. Sources were carefully selected to ensure academic credibility and relevance, with a focus on primary research, governmental data, and institutional assessments (e.g., World Bank, RAND, CSIS).

Findings: The findings demonstrate that ISIS's rise was facilitated by a confluence of factors including state failure, sectarian divisions, and foreign interventions. The fall of ISIS, while reducing its territorial control, has not eradicated its ideological and insurgent capabilities. The socio-economic consequences include widespread displacement, infrastructure devastation, unemployment, and sectarian polarization. In security terms, the region continues to grapple with insurgent violence, proliferation of extremist ideologies, and instability in post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

Keywords: ISIS, Middle East, terrorism, insurgency, socio-economic impact, security, radicalization, Syria, Iraq.

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as Daesh, emerged as one of the most dangerous and globally impactful terrorist organizations of the 21st century. It established a brutal proto-state in parts of Iraq and Syria, peaking between 2014 and 2016, before facing a steady decline due to concerted regional and international military operations. The group's ideology, military tactics, and ability to exploit political vacuums not only destabilized the Middle East but also altered global security paradigms and inflicted long-term socio-economic damage across affected regions.

This research employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) technique to synthesize data from a wide range of scholarly and policy-based sources to assess the rise and fall of ISIS and the resulting impacts on the Middle East's socio-economic and security landscape. SLR ensures a comprehensive, replicable, and unbiased

examination of peer-reviewed literature, policy briefs, organizational reports, and empirical studies (Shawn, 2023).

ISIS capitalized on post-invasion instability in Iraq, the Syrian civil war, sectarian tensions, and the marginalization of Sunni communities to gain territory and legitimacy (History.com, 2017; Rand Corporation, 2018.). The group's ascent in 2014 saw the capture of Mosul, Raqqa, and vast areas across both countries. According to Stanford University, their self-declared caliphate enforced a draconian interpretation of Sharia law, relied on oil revenues and extortion, and used sophisticated propaganda to recruit thousands globally. By 2019, the Islamic State lost its territorial hold due to coalition offensives, local resistance, and internal fractures (Cordesman, 2020; The World Bank, 2022). However, its ideological residue, splinter groups, and sleeper cells have kept the threat persistent, evolving from a territorial entity to a dispersed insurgency (Munir, 2023; The Ripple Effects of the Syrian Conflict in the Mashreq Region, 2020) The socio-economic effects of ISIS's reign and its aftermath are profound. In Iraq and Syria, ISIS devastated infrastructure, displaced millions, and caused immense psychological and communal trauma (Shawn, 2023). Economic activity in captured areas plummeted, educational systems collapsed, and basic health and sanitation services deteriorated (The World Bank, 2022; Cordesman, 2018). The post-ISIS reconstruction has faced challenges due to weak governance, sectarian distrust, and donor fatigue (Munir, 2023; Safavi & Khaksar, 2018).

From a security standpoint, ISIS destabilized neighboring countries and triggered a re-evaluation of counterterrorism strategies worldwide. (Aziz,2025) The group's use of encrypted communications, lone-wolf attacks, and online radicalization posed new challenges to intelligence agencies (Rand Corporation, 2018.; Dashtgard & Afrapoli, 2024). Its ability to reemerge in weakened states like Syria or through affiliates in Africa and South Asia has shown that the ISIS threat, though diminished, remains unresolved (ISIS: Resilient on Sixth Anniversary, 2020).

Literature Review:
This literature review applies the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to evaluate, synthesize, and interpret scholarly, institutional, and media perspectives on the rise and fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), with a specific focus on the socio-economic and security impacts across the Middle East. The review integrates literature from a wide range of credible sources published between 2010 and 2024.

1.   Historical Roots and Rise of ISIS:
The roots of ISIS can be traced back to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent insurgency led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, which eventually evolved into al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). As reported by History.com (2017), the group rebranded itself as ISIS in 2013, extending its operational reach into war-torn Syria. Greene & Thompson (2015) further contextualize how the Syrian civil war, coupled with a power vacuum in Iraq, enabled the rapid territorial expansion of ISIS. Kar and Carter (2025) from The Washington Institute emphasizes the ideological rigidity of ISIS, rooted in Salafi-jihadist doctrine, which allowed the group to distinguish itself from other jihadist organizations. Rand Corporation (2018) echoes this observation, explaining ISIS's strategic exploitation of political and sectarian divisions in Iraq and Syria to recruit marginalized Sunni populations.

2.   Governance, Violence, and Economic Infrastructure under ISIS:
ISIS's governance strategy was distinct in its bureaucratic structure, as it established courts, taxation, and welfare systems within its self-declared caliphate (Khan, 2024; Saeed, 2025). While this earned them some initial local support, their brutal enforcement of Sharia law, public executions, and slave trade practices undermined their legitimacy (Crossroads: The Future of Iraq's Minorities after ISIS, 2017). The World Bank (2015) highlighted that ISIS's occupation caused severe economic dislocation, including the destruction of infrastructure, loss of livelihoods, and the disruption of trade routes, especially in Iraq and Syria. Reports further document the looting of banks, oil smuggling operations, and the imposition of jizya (tax on non-Muslims), which funded their operations while further impoverishing local populations (Jang & Lee, 2014).

3. Fall and Territorial Defeat of ISIS:

The territorial decline of ISIS began with a coalition of Iraqi, Kurdish, and international forces retaking key cities between 2015 and 2019. The loss of Mosul in 2017 and Raqqa later that year marked major turning points (Greene & Thompson, 2015; History.com, 2017). However, recent studies (Dashtgard & Afrapoli, 2024; Azhari, 2024) caution against equating territorial loss with the group's full defeat, emphasizing the persistence of its ideology and sleeper cells.

4. Socio-Economic Impact on the Middle East:

The long-term socio-economic impacts of ISIS are stark. The World Bank (2022) noted that over 6 million people were internally displaced in Iraq and Syria. A report detailed how educational institutions were destroyed, public health systems collapsed, and unemployment soared in ISIS-affected regions. (Kadercan, 2016) The war against ISIS further strained host country economies such as Jordan, Türkiye, and Lebanon due to refugee influxes (Cordesman, 2020). Reports from Rand Corporation (2018) and CyberLeninka explore the broader regional destabilization, noting how the group's ideological narratives deepened sectarian polarization, hindering post-conflict reconciliation. (Mohiuddin, 2021).

5. Security Implications and Regional Geopolitics:

The rise of ISIS significantly altered regional and global security paradigms. ISIS introduced a decentralized global jihadist model that encouraged lone-wolf attacks across Europe, Asia, and North America. (ISIS: Resilient on Sixth Anniversary, 2020). The group's media outreach and online recruitment further expanded their reach, contributing to attacks in Paris, Brussels, and Istanbul (Samer Bakkour & Stansfield, 2023). The geopolitical response was complex. Iran-backed militias, U.S. coalition forces, and Russian airstrikes all played roles in combatting ISIS, yet the competing interests among these actors often complicated efforts for long-term stabilization (Seidel, 2024).

6. Post-ISIS Recovery and Resilience:

Post-conflict recovery remains a major challenge. Reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Syria are often hindered by weak governance, corruption, and lingering sectarian tensions (The World Bank, 2022; Cordesman, 2018). The researchers emphasize the need for inclusive governance and transitional justice mechanisms to prevent the re-emergence of extremism. (Shawn, 2023)). Moreover, social cohesion in liberated areas remains fragile. Studies by GeoResearch reveal that many returning IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) face stigmatization, limited access to services, and fear of retaliation, making reintegration difficult. (Safavi & Khaksar, 2018). The resumption of public services, job creation, and mental health support are identified as vital steps for sustainable peace.

7. Future Threat Landscape:

Though ISIS has lost its caliphate, its evolving threat remains real. As noted by the Wilson Center (2020) and Seidel (2024), recent attacks in Syria and Iraq suggest a resurgence of coordinated guerrilla tactics. The group is increasingly focusing on Africa and Southeast Asia as operational theaters, a shift supported by CSIS (2018) and Springer (2025). ISIS's adaptability, especially in cyberspace, allows it to radicalize individuals remotely, creating transnational security risks. Shawn (2023) and Dashtgard & Afrapoli, (2024) suggest that international cooperation, counter-narrative campaigns, and intelligence-sharing must be strengthened to combat this evolving threat.

This systematic review underscores that ISIS, while militarily weakened, has left an enduring legacy that continues to influence the socio-economic and security contours of the Middle East. The literature consistently reveals that holistic recovery— encompassing reconstruction, reconciliation, and resilience—is essential to preventing future extremist resurgence.

Research Gap:

While a substantial body of literature exists on the rise and military downfall of ISIS, much of it is focused on operational, ideological, and tactical aspects. However, there remains a noticeable gap in understanding the long-term socio-economic consequences in post-ISIS regions, particularly in relation to infrastructure rebuilding, education recovery, inter-ethnic reconciliation, and community reintegration efforts. The majority of existing studies

concentrate on immediate security responses and battlefield outcomes, often overlooking the lived experiences of affected populations and the pace of their recovery. Additionally, limited comparative research has been conducted on how different Middle Eastern states have adapted their internal and regional security architectures in response to the ISIS threat. Most academic and policy-oriented works are heavily Iraqand Syria-centric, underrepresenting the effects and policy shifts in neighboring countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Türkiye, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. There is also insufficient exploration of how ISIS's ideological legacy continues to influence regional radicalization patterns and whether current counter-extremism policies adequately address these evolving dynamics. This review identifies the need for interdisciplinary studies that bridge security, governance, and socio-economic rehabilitation frameworks to fully assess the multilayered impact of ISIS across the Middle East.

Theoretical Framework:

The rise and fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its socioeconomic and security impacts in the Middle East can be analyzed through a multidisciplinary theoretical framework drawing from Political Islam Theory, Relative Deprivation Theory, and Failed State Theory. These perspectives collectively offer insights into the ideological motivations, socio-political grievances, and structural weaknesses that contributed to the emergence, expansion, and eventual decline of ISIS, as well as the enduring effects on the region.

• Political Islam Theory:

Political Islam Theory is central to understanding the ideological underpinnings of ISIS. The group's agenda was deeply rooted in Salafi-jihadist interpretations of Islam, which aimed to restore a caliphate based on early Islamic governance models (Rand Corporation, 2018). ISIS leveraged religious symbolism and narratives to recruit followers, gain legitimacy, and justify extreme violence. (Dashtgard & Afrapoli, 2024). The theory elucidates how religion, when politicized, becomes a tool for power acquisition and social control, as seen in ISIS's governance structures and outreach campaigns (History.com, 2017; Manara Magazine, 2024).

• Relative Deprivation Theory:

Relative Deprivation Theory explains the socio-economic roots of support for ISIS. Many Sunni populations in Iraq and Syria experienced marginalization, unemployment, and political exclusion, particularly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Syrian civil war (The World Bank, 2022; Crossroads: The Future of Iraq's Minorities after ISIS, 2017). These grievances created a fertile ground for ISIS propaganda that framed the group as a defender of disenfranchised communities (Cordesman, 2018). Economic hardship, lack of basic services, and social fragmentation facilitated recruitment into ISIS ranks, especially among youth who perceived themselves as victims of state failure and global neglect (Karr & Carter, 2025).

• Failed State Theory:

Failed State Theory provides a macro-political lens through which the structural collapse of Iraq and Syria is viewed. The theory posits that weak or collapsed states are unable to maintain control, provide services, or protect their citizens, creating a vacuum that non-state actors like ISIS can exploit (Ryan, 2015). In Iraq, the disbanding of the Ba'athist military and the sectarian policies of Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki undermined national unity, while in Syria, the Assad regime's brutality against dissenters contributed to state fragmentation (Greene & Thompson, 2015; Dashtgard & Afrapoli, 2024). This allowed ISIS to seize territory, establish governance institutions, and wage transnational jihad.

Integrated Framework and Impact Analysis:

An integrated framework that combines these theories reveals how ideological, socio-economic, and structural conditions converged to facilitate ISIS's rise. Furthermore, it helps explain the group's resilience and the long-term destabilization of the region. ISIS not only undermined national sovereignties but also inflicted lasting damage on infrastructure, economies, and societal cohesion. Post-ISIS recovery remains slow, particularly in areas such as Mosul, where reconstruction policies have struggled to address deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities. This framework thus serves as a lens for analyzing both the causal dynamics behind ISIS's trajectory and its broader implications for Middle Eastern societies, especially in terms of

radicalization, economic recovery, and regional security alignment.

Research Questions:
i. How did ISIS rule affect local economies, healthcare, and education in Iraq and Syria?
ii. What are the lasting effects of ISIS violence on minority communities and social recovery?

Methodology:
This research employs a qualitative approach grounded in an extensive review and analysis of secondary data to investigate the rise and fall of ISIS and its impact on the socio-economic and security dynamics of the Middle East. The study systematically examines scholarly articles, policy reports, governmental and non-governmental publications, and credible news sources published between 2010 and 2024.

➢ **Data Sources:**
The data for this study were gathered from a broad spectrum of authentic and authoritative sources, including peer-reviewed journals, think tank reports, international organizations' assessments, and specialized databases such as JSTOR, ScienceDirect, RAND Corporation, and World Bank reports. These sources provide empirical evidence, in-depth policy analysis, and comprehensive case studies on ISIS's emergence, territorial expansion and contraction, socio-economic consequences, and security-related developments in the region.

➢ **Research Design and Analytical Approach:**
A thematic content analysis method was utilized to identify and synthesize key themes relevant to the study. The research focuses on four primary themes:

• **The Rise of ISIS**:
Analysis of the socio-political context and conflicts that enabled the emergence and expansion of ISIS.

• **The Fall of ISIS**:
Examination of military operations, international coalitions, and local efforts contributing to the decline of ISIS.

• **Socio-Economic Impact**:
Assessment of ISIS's effects on economic conditions, infrastructure, population displacement, and social structures in affected areas.

• **Security Dynamics**: Evaluation of shifts in regional and international security landscapes, counterterrorism measures, and evolving terrorist threats.

Analysis:
Research Question 1:
How did ISIS rule affect local economies, healthcare, and education in Iraq and Syria?

• **Economic Devastation and Structural Collapse**
ISIS's occupation of large swaths of Iraq and Syria caused substantial economic devastation, both directly through violence and indirectly through its governance structures. The economic costs of the conflict were astronomical. (Koohkan, 2020). In Iraq alone, the World Bank estimated that the total cost of conflict-related damages, including destruction to agriculture, infrastructure, healthcare, and education, reached approximately $45.7 billion (The World Bank, 2022). The effects of ISIS rule were felt not just in the areas under its control, but also in neighboring countries. (ISIS: Resilient on Sixth Anniversary, 2020). The RAND Corporation's research underscores how ISIS's attempts to implement rudimentary governance in cities like Mosul and Raqqa were overwhelmed by the group's violent and coercive rule, which crippled local economies. The destruction of supply chains, widespread insecurity, and infrastructure damage led to substantial economic contraction (Rand Corporation, 2018).
A critical area of economic collapse was agriculture, which is central to the livelihoods of rural communities in both Iraq and Syria. (Shawn, 2023). ISIS's territorial control and the ongoing violence severely disrupted agricultural activities. (Karr & Carter, 2025). In Iraq, agricultural production was sharply reduced due to insecurity, the contamination of farmland with unexploded ordnance, and the destruction of irrigation systems. (Seidel, 2024). As a result, food insecurity increased, exacerbating the already dire economic conditions. (Khan, 2024).

The World Bank reports that the country's agricultural sector was devastated by these factors, leading to an increase in unemployment and poverty (The World Bank, 2022). Many households found themselves in extreme vulnerability, unable to recover from the combination of economic contraction and displacement caused by the conflict (Azhari, 2024)

In Syria, the effects of ISIS rule combined with the broader civil war to severely undermine the country's economy. (Saeed, 2025). Key industrial centers and oil infrastructure under ISIS control were destroyed or sabotaged, worsening the country's economic instability. (Samer Bakkour & Stansfield, 2023). Neighboring countries, too, suffered economic setbacks as a result of interrupted trade routes and diminished tourism, both of which had been vital economic lifelines for the region (Shafaq News, 2025). ISIS also imposed a brutal system of taxation and extortion, further draining local resources. The International Crisis Group explains that these financial burdens severely limited entrepreneurial activities, leaving communities unable to recover or rebuild their economies. Local economies under ISIS rule were reduced to mere survival mechanisms, with little room for growth or long-term development. (The Ripple Effects of the Syrian Conflict in the Mashreq Region, 2020).

- **Healthcare System Collapse:**
The healthcare systems in both Iraq and Syria were severely impacted by ISIS's rule. (Ryan, 2015). In Iraq, healthcare facilities in conflict-affected regions suffered widespread destruction, particularly in governorates like Salah al-Din, where approximately 36% of health facilities were either destroyed or rendered nonfunctional due to the fighting and deliberate targeting of medical infrastructure. (Safavi & Khaksar, 2018). The governorate of Ninewa, which includes the city of Mosul, experienced a healthcare system collapse, with only 30% of hospital beds functional by 2018. (Shawn, 2023). As ISIS gained control of large territories, it not only destroyed physical healthcare infrastructure but also imposed a brutal governance model that displaced healthcare workers, particularly those from minority and vulnerable communities. (Crossroads: The Future of Iraq's Minorities after

ISIS, 2017). Many doctors fled due to threats from ISIS or loss of resources, further exacerbating the fragility of the healthcare system and leaving substantial portions of the population with limited access to medical care. (Kadercan, 2016).

In Syria, the situation was equally dire. The country's healthcare infrastructure suffered massive degradation as a result of the ongoing conflict and ISIS's territorial expansion. (The Ripple Effects of the Syrian Conflict in the Mashreq Region, 2020). Hospitals and clinics were destroyed, and health personnel faced targeted violence or were displaced from the conflict zones. (Seidel, 2024). Furthermore, medical supply chains were disrupted, leading to shortages of essential medicines and medical equipment. (Shafaq News, 2025). As a result, health outcomes in both countries worsened, with increasing mortality rates and the spread of preventable diseases such as cholera and typhoid. (ISIS: Resilient on Sixth Anniversary, 2020). The collapse of healthcare systems disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, including children, women, and displaced persons, who were most in need of medical care during these tumultuous times. (The Ripple Effects of the Syrian Conflict in the Mashreq Region, 2020).

The lack of functional healthcare infrastructure further aggravated the humanitarian crisis. The healthcare systems, which had already been fragile in both Iraq and Syria due to years of previous conflict, were rendered virtually non-functional under ISIS rule. (Samer Bakkour & Stansfield, 2023). With healthcare workers fleeing the conflict zones, clinics and hospitals remained understaffed and ill-equipped to handle the needs of the population. (Khan, 2024). The brutal combination of infrastructure destruction, healthcare worker displacement, and shortages of medical supplies compounded the suffering of the people in ISIS-controlled areas, creating a long-lasting burden on both countries' healthcare systems. (The World Bank, 2022).

- **Educational Disruption and**
- **Indoctrination**
The educational systems in both Iraq and Syria were similarly devastated by ISIS's rule. In Iraq, over 50% of schools required rehabilitation after the expulsion of ISIS forces, and approximately 3.2 million children were unable to attend school

due to displacement, insecurity, and school destruction. (Azhari, 2024). According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Human Capital Index for Iraq dropped to 0.41 during this period, reflecting significant declines in educational attainment and a diminished capacity for future productivity. (Seidel, 2024). This erosion of human capital is not only a tragedy for the individuals directly affected but also represents a significant threat to Iraq's long-term socioeconomic development. (The Ripple Effects of the Syrian Conflict in the Mashreq Region, 2020). As the war in Iraq dragged on, the possibility of rebuilding the educational system became increasingly difficult, leaving an entire generation with limited access to education and, consequently, fewer opportunities for a better future. (ISIS: Resilient on Sixth Anniversary, 2020).

In ISIS-controlled areas of Syria, the impact on education was equally profound. Schools were either closed or repurposed for military uses, and many teachers fled or were killed during the conflict. (Shafaq News, 2025). ISIS imposed an ideologically driven curriculum that emphasized religious dogma, military training, and radical ideologies, while secular subjects and critical thinking were systematically marginalized. (Mohiuddin, 2021). This form of educational deprivation not only denied children a well-rounded education but also exposed them to systematic indoctrination. (Cordesman, 2020). ISIS's ideological curriculum played a key role in shaping the next generation of fighters and supporters, effectively increasing the risk of future radicalization. (Munir, 2023).

The long-term effects of ISIS's education policies are still felt today, particularly in terms of social development and future workforce potential. (Dashtgard & Afrapoli, 2024). By depriving children of a comprehensive education, ISIS stunted their cognitive, social, and emotional development, reducing their ability to engage critically with the world around them. (Khan, 2024). Furthermore, this form of educational manipulation meant that many children were taught to view violence and extremism as viable pathways for success, further entrenching the cycle of conflict in the region. (Stansfield, 2016). The devastation of the educational sector in both Iraq and Syria continues to limit the opportunities available to those affected by ISIS's rule.

Research Question 2:
What are the lasting effects of ISIS violence on minority communities and social recovery?

● **Targeted Persecution and Genocide**
One of the most horrific and enduring legacies of ISIS's rule was its targeted persecution of minority communities. ISIS's violent campaigns aimed at erasing religious and ethnic minorities from their territories left lasting trauma and displacement in their wake. (Crossroads: The Future of Iraq's Minorities after ISIS, 2017). Among the most severely affected groups were the Yazidis, a religious minority group primarily located in northern Iraq. ISIS's genocidal actions against the Yazidi population in 2014 are well-documented. (Rosenblatt, 2020). Thousands of Yazidi men were killed in mass executions, while women and children were abducted, enslaved, and subjected to horrific sexual violence. (The Ripple Effects of the Syrian Conflict in the Mashreq Region, 2020). Many of these women remain missing to this day, as their abduction by ISIS created a deep and lasting wound in the community. (Azhari, 2024). These women, now survivors, have been left with the complex task of rebuilding their lives amid persistent traumas. The genocidal campaign against the Yazidis was not merely an act of violence but a calculated effort to eradicate their cultural and religious presence in northern Iraq. (Dashtgard & Afrapoli,2024). ISIS's systematic attacks on Yazidi towns and villages aimed at destroying not just individuals but the entire Yazidi way of life. (Karr & Carter, 2025). The group destroyed cultural sites, such as the revered Yazidi shrine at Lalish, and targeted specific cultural symbols for annihilation. In 2016, the United Nations officially recognized ISIS's actions as genocide, but despite this recognition, justice for the victims has been slow, and the survivors continue to face overwhelming challenges. (Rosenblatt, 2020).

Similarly, other minority groups, especially Shia Muslims, also faced targeted violence under ISIS rule. The group's extreme sectarian ideology led to widespread massacres of Shia Muslims, including mass executions, forced conversions, and the destruction of religious sites. (Munir, 2023). ISIS sought to purge Shia communities

from areas it controlled, seeing them as apostates deserving of extermination. The group's attacks on Shia shrines, such as the destruction of the Askariya shrine in Samarra, were symbolic of their broader sectarian agenda. (Shawn, 2023). These attacks were designed not only to kill but to erase the cultural and religious fabric of Shia Islam in the region. (Azhari, 2024). This violence against Shia Muslims, along with other religious minorities, resulted in significant displacement, trauma, and long-lasting sectarian divisions. (Seidel, 2024). The effects of ISIS's genocidal violence against these minority communities have been felt in ways that transcend the immediate horrors. Survivors have been left to grapple with the emotional and social fallout of their experiences, and entire communities have been fractured. (Shafaq News, 2025). The violent legacy of ISIS continues to fuel sectarian tensions and hinder efforts at social cohesion and regional stability. (Chakrobarty, 2024).

● **Challenges in Social Recovery and Reconciliation**

Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS, the path to recovery for minority communities remains obstructed by a host of challenges. The destruction of infrastructure, including homes, schools, and religious sites, has made the process of rebuilding these communities slow and fraught with difficulty. (ISIS: Resilient on Sixth Anniversary, 2020). Displacement, which was one of the primary tactics used by ISIS to break the spirit of resistant communities, has left many minorities unable to return to their ancestral homes. (Koohkan, 2020). Yazidis, Christians, and other displaced minorities face considerable obstacles in trying to resettle in areas that were once their homes. These include not just physical reconstruction but also security concerns, as many areas are still affected by ISIS remnants, local militias, and continuing sectarian violence. (Crossroads: The Future of Iraq's Minorities after ISIS, 2017). The Yazidi community, in particular, continues to experience deep social fragmentation as a result of ISIS's violence. Many Yazidi women and girls who were captured by ISIS were subjected to sexual slavery, forced marriages, and torture. These women, now survivors, often return to their communities carrying not only physical scars but also psychological trauma that complicates the already complicated process of reintegration. (Azhari, 2024). For these survivors, the road to healing is long and painful, as the community must navigate not just the trauma of violence but also the social stigma attached to being a "victim" of such extreme brutality. (Saeed, 2025). This has led to a sense of alienation within the larger Yazidi community, where some survivors find it difficult to reconnect with their peers who have not experienced the same horrors. (Dashtgard & Afrapoli, 2024).

In addition to the psychological toll on individuals, the lack of robust transitional justice mechanisms has further hindered efforts toward reconciliation. Many survivors are still waiting for the recognition of their suffering, reparations for their losses, and access to the support services they need. (Khan, 2024). Justice processes have been slow and often incomplete. While some progress has been made in terms of international recognition and legal frameworks (such as the recognition of Yazidi genocide), there remains a significant gap in local efforts to hold perpetrators accountable and provide redress to victims. (Chakrobarty, 2024). The absence of meaningful justice has created a sense of marginalization and frustration within affected communities, making reconciliation efforts more difficult. (Rosenblatt, 2020). Moreover, the failure to address the root causes of conflict and social divisions within the region has left the process of social recovery in a precarious state. (Shawn, 2023). The ongoing lack of effective governance, the persistent influence of armed groups, and the weakness of state institutions have all contributed to a climate of mistrust and fear. (Cordesman, 2020). For minority communities who have already experienced violent persecution, the absence of a strong, accountable state only deepens their sense of insecurity. Crossroads: The Future of Iraq's Minorities after ISIS, 2017). As a result, efforts at social healing are often hindered by the political and social context in which they are taking place.

● **Ongoing Security Threats and Radicalization**

Even though ISIS has lost much of its territorial holdings, the group remains a potent security threat through underground networks and lingering extremist sympathizers. (Shawn, 2023). Experts warn that ISIS continues to operate

through sleeper cells in Iraq and Syria, particularly in remote and marginalized areas such as northeastern Syria (Shafaq News, 2025). These cells continue to carry out guerrilla-style attacks, targeting both local populations and government forces, and destabilizing the region. (Seidel, 2024). The persistence of ISIS as an active militant threat has complicated the security situation and hampered the return of displaced minorities, especially in areas where ISIS once held strong control. (Munir, 2023). One of the major factors enabling ISIS's continued threat is the presence of radicalized individuals in overcrowded and under-resourced detention camps. The most notorious of these is the al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria, where thousands of individuals linked to ISIS, including women and children, remain detained under harsh conditions. (Mohiuddin, 2021). The lack of rehabilitation programs and adequate resources has allowed extremist ideology to flourish in these camps. (Rosenblatt, 2020). Radicalized individuals continue to spread ISIS's message among detainees, posing a grave risk to future stability (Shafaq News, 2025). The children of ISIS fighters, who are raised in these camps, are particularly vulnerable to radicalization, further perpetuating the cycle of violence and extremism. (Cordesman, 2020).

Failure to address the conditions in these camps and provide adequate rehabilitation programs for former ISIS fighters and their families could lead to the resurgence of ISIS. The group's ideology thrives in environments where disenfranchised and vulnerable individuals can be recruited and radicalized. (Koohkan, 2020). The continued existence of ISIS-affiliated networks represents a serious security challenge to regional stability and a significant barrier to peace-building efforts. (Karr & Carter, 2025). In addition to the direct threat of terrorism, the lingering effects of radicalization contribute to the ongoing instability in the region. Socio-economic grievances, combined with the persistence of extremist ideologies, continue to fuel radicalization among disaffected populations. (Chakrobarty, 2024). This not only threatens the security of the region but also complicates efforts to foster social integration and long-term peace.

Conclusion:

The rise and fall of ISIS have significantly transformed the socio-economic and security landscape of Iraq and Syria, leaving behind a legacy of widespread destruction and complex challenges. ISIS's rule severely disrupted local economies, healthcare, and education systems, causing the collapse of infrastructure, reduced access to essential services, and widespread social dislocation. The group's violent governance inflicted not only immediate harm but also long-term obstacles to recovery for affected populations. Minority communities, including the Yazidis and Shia Muslims, experienced targeted persecution, and genocide, resulting in deep societal divisions and demographic changes. The ongoing difficulties in social recovery, such as the lack of adequate transitional justice and fragile security conditions, highlight the enduring consequences of ISIS's terror. Despite losing territorial control, the persistence of extremist ideologies and security threats reveals that ISIS's impact goes beyond military defeat, requiring continued efforts in counterterrorism and deradicalization. In conclusion, the findings emphasize the necessity of a comprehensive approach to post-ISIS recovery that includes economic rebuilding, rehabilitation of healthcare and education, social healing, and reform of security institutions. Only through coordinated international assistance and context-specific strategies can the region begin to heal from the wounds inflicted by ISIS and move toward a more peaceful and stable future.

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