

# Exceptionalism in US Foreign Policy: A Case Study of ISIS

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## Abstract

Exceptionalism has been the principal narrative of the United States' foreign policy decision-making. It is the set of beliefs and principles that envisages the country's uniqueness and superiority over the rest. It has two strands: one being its status as an exemplar state; and the other being God's chosen people – the latter being the dominant one. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) threatened life, liberty, pursuit of happiness and freedom – far away from the shores of the US. However, with 'doing God's work' underpinning its foreign policy dictates – the US mobilised its military forces and spearheaded the campaign to help its Middle Eastern allies in getting rid of ISIS. The article aims to understand the basic tenets of US exceptionalism and the intervening variables which led the country to fight against the ISIS.

**Keywords:** Exceptionalism, Islamic State, US Foreign Policy, Syria, Moral Cause, Manifest Destiny, US Constitution.

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## Introduction

It would not be an overly ambitious claim to say that Woodrow Wilson's 'calling for a cause'<sup>1</sup> shaped the United States' (US) foreign conduct in modern history, perhaps now more than it did in his own time. It has remained an epicentre of the country's foreign policy, where the entire roster of preceding presidents has formulated this policy on a more or less similar foundation. Prior to the actions taken against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the US had kept its distance from the issue of ISIS altogether due to the war-weary mood of Congress. However, a number of issues rose which compelled the US to push back against ISIS. The factors which compelled it to intervene have an interesting dynamism which correspondingly allows an insight into how this particular problem has been approached.

The essence of US exceptionalism is not about 'uniqueness' or 'difference', rather it is based on the belief that the path of history the country follows is different from the laws and norms that govern other countries.<sup>2</sup> The US is not merely bigger or powerful, rather an 'exception'

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<sup>1</sup> Different scholars have interpreted 'calling for a cause' and US exceptionalism differently. Louise Chipley Slavicek, referred to it as the 'Allied cause' in *The Treaty of Versailles*, Milestones in Modern World History (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2010), 32-34. On the other hand, Graebner and Bennett cited Wilson calling for domestic support at Boston on February 25, 1919 – a reflection of US exceptionalism having its roots in internal politics. Norman A. Graebner and Edward M. Bennett, *The Versailles Treaty and its Legacy: The Failure of the Wilsonian Vision* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 43. Mearsheimer translated Wilsonianism and American exceptionalism as anti-realist approaches, John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994-95): 5-49, DOI: 10.2307/2539078. Martel considered it part of grand strategic history in which promotion of US values was important, William C. Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Need for an Effective American Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 19. Layne considered it a scheme of global hegemony in the cloak of exceptionalism, Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>2</sup> K. J. Holsti, "Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy: Is It Exceptional?" *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 3 (2010): 387-404 (382).

– a holder and preacher of freedom and liberty with moral superiority.<sup>3</sup> This belief is the main ingredient of its cultural and intellectual framework and policies.<sup>4</sup> There are two consequentialist strands of exceptionalist thought that influence its foreign policy:

1. The US as an exemplar state –referred to as ‘Global Exceptionalism’.
2. The US as a missionary nation (often the more dominant strand) – referred to as ‘Messianic Exceptionalism.’<sup>5</sup>

Since independence, both strands have influenced the country’s international relations. Running parallel to the demands of exceptionalism was the idea of ‘promotion of American values to the world’:

Exceptionalist language is not only used in public explanation of policy, but also used by policymakers themselves behind closed doors...the belief in American exceptionalism, therefore, provides the framework for discourse in US foreign policymaking, even if it is rarely the main determining factor of policy itself.<sup>6</sup>

As the article progresses, explanation of the exceptional element in US’ foreign policy will be highlighted and how this element forced outcomes against the ISIS contrary to the will of the executors of the foreign policy. Policymakers are the primary translators and responders to the forces prevailing in the international system who shape their decisions

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<sup>3</sup> “George W. Bush: Inaugural Address” (speech, Washington, D.C., January 20, 2005), *CBS News*, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/george-w-bush-inaugural-address-2005/>. President Bush calling the US a beacon of light in the dark world.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence F. Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War over Iraq: Saddam’s Tyranny and America’s Mission* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), 126-127. Neo-conservatives Kaplan and Kristol argued that ‘American Internationalism’ has its roots in American Exceptionalism that is the unique framework that is reflected in US foreign policy behaviour.

<sup>5</sup> Misha Desai, “‘The Greatest Nation on Earth’: The Different Types of American Exceptionalism Articulated in Presidential Rhetoric” (paper, Department of History Lund University, Lund, 2014), <http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=4451946&fileId=4451949>.

<sup>6</sup> Trevor B. McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: US Foreign Policy since 1974* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 187.

keeping in view their states' national interest. Whilst remaining attentive to 'systemic constraints', sooner or later, policymakers also have to back their foreign policy goals with domestic factors, socio-political agreements, public support and state institutions.<sup>7</sup>

### **Exceptionalism in US Foreign Policy: Its Roots**

Foreign policy pertains to minor and major adjustments in the wake of changes in the global political landscape. More so, it is an adjustment (in terms of needs and means) to the trends of international politics. Assessment, on the part of statesmen, of available resources defined as 'national interest' in fulfilling set goals in due course is the essence of foreign policy. Different objectives require different techniques. Ignoring core interests or overlap between core and non-core interests can cause ambiguity and lead to imbalance between the means and ends.<sup>8</sup>

In the post-Second World War international order, US foreign policy conduct overshadowed global politics which were assessed by US statesmen in accordance with their intellectual history and under the influence of the country's so-assumed 'exceptional character', values of freedom, liberty and rule of law, constitutionalism, capitalism and right of self-determination.<sup>9</sup> These values have, in one way or another, remained at the centre of US foreign policy, effectively giving birth to the concept of 'Exceptionalism', and shaping its entire history as a nation - restraining its leaders, from foreign entanglement as a 'role model' on the one hand; and pushing them in international politics as a 'beacon of light to lead' on the

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<sup>7</sup> Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 280-282.

<sup>8</sup> Social fabric refers to the 'social contract' between the state and citizens based on the liberties of individuals and authority of the state. Ignoring is rejecting certain aspects; overlapping is achievement of same goal in policy making through different means; and imbalance is focusing on sufficient measures for non-vital goals at the expense of vital ones.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 305.

other.<sup>10</sup> Method instead of substance shaped the country's involvement in world affairs.<sup>11</sup> Historically, this meant advocating the 'fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.'<sup>12</sup> Consequently, this premise became the cornerstone to defend and justify the annexation of Texas, Oregon from the British, and war with Mexico in 1846-48.<sup>13</sup> Ostensibly, Sullivan's use of the word 'Providence' highlights this 'exceptionalism' as being deeply religious. Mountjoy highlighted three main aspects of 'Manifest Destiny':

...the special virtues of the American people and their institutions; their mission to redeem and remake the world in the image of America; and the American destiny under God to accomplish this sublime task.<sup>14</sup>

According to Stuart, 'Manifest Destiny implied not simply territorial growth, but sanctified ideology and institutions.'<sup>15</sup> Noble, while shedding light on this religious strand, cited Charles and Mary Beard who regarded Jefferson as the 'greatest political saint' since he believed the 'American nation to be a society of people speaking a common language, knit together by ties of blood.'<sup>16</sup> Similarly, McCrisken also saw the

<sup>10</sup> McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: US Foreign Policy since 1974*, 44.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (New York: Allen Lane, 2014), 129.

<sup>12</sup> John O'Sullivan – a journalist by profession – in his essay titled as "Annexation (1845)" in July-August 1845 issue of *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, supported the idea of annexation of various territories, Shane Mountjoy, *Manifest Destiny: Westward Expansion*, Milestones in American History (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2009), 9; *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Mountjoy, *Manifest Destiny: Westward Expansion*, 11-12; War with Mexico started on April 25, 1846 when American dragoons were attacked by Mexican soldiers and concluded on February 2, 1848 by the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in Mexico, Daniel P. Murphy and Stephen Armstrong, *5 Steps to a 5: AP U.S. History 2018* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017), 43, 148.

<sup>14</sup> Mountjoy, *Manifest Destiny: Westward Expansion*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Reginald C. Stuart, *United States Expansionism and British North America, 1775–1871* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 85.

<sup>16</sup> David W. Noble, *Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism*, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 28-29.

religious factor as the second, yet more dominant version of US exceptionalism.<sup>17</sup> He cited Albert Weinberg who defined ‘Manifest Destiny’ as ‘the doctrine that one nation has a preeminent social worth, a distinctively lofty mission, and consequently, unique rights in the application of moral principles.’<sup>18</sup> McCrisken maintained that this idea was so strong and appealing that it overshadowed and instituted itself as the ‘national creed.’<sup>19</sup>

The intention behind this was to present a model based loosely on the US’ values providing a ‘customisable outline’ for the international order. Since then, policymakers have attached ‘Woodrow Wilson’s calling for a cause’ in their international conduct. For neoclassical realists, both internal and external factors are an important part of foreign policy conduct. However, this article argues that domestic factors have remained an integral part of US foreign policy initiatives, i.e., the ‘exceptional character’ rooted in the distinct structure of the country’s political ethos. This political culture and national identity was the intellectual creativity of its forefathers, who centred this value system against European norms of colour, creed, race and religion at the time.<sup>20</sup> Since then, this character of unity has shaped the country’s conduct, and compromising it openly has remained a question mark for the practitioners of US foreign policy.

The idea that the US can perceive itself or indeed any of its actions throughout the course of history as ‘exceptional’ has a broad link with its political philosophy. Culturally, Americans believe that their political struggle, Constitution and institutional setup are a unique experiment in

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<sup>17</sup> McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: US Foreign Policy since 1974*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: US Foreign Policy since 1974*.

<sup>20</sup> David M. Abshire, “Washington, Clay and Lincoln-American Exceptionalism: Three Heroic Stories” (lecture, The Centre for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, Washington, D.C., October 13, 2011), [https://www.thepresidency.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Washington\\_Clay\\_and\\_Lincoln\\_Phi\\_Beta\\_Kappa\\_Lecture.pdf](https://www.thepresidency.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Washington_Clay_and_Lincoln_Phi_Beta_Kappa_Lecture.pdf). Abraham Lincoln, welcoming the immigrants on the ground that American nationality is not something that emerges out from history, colour or race, its adherence to the values of liberty, democracy and freedom, which are in actual natural values.

governance. In contemporary world politics, perhaps no other state has such a belief sown into its ideals. Thus, the US, in issues (such as the activities of ISIS) finds that it has an ‘obligation’ to promote its ‘values’ in the world, as these are universal values, albeit in dearth.

How this obligation is perceived is relative. According to Holsti, the US ‘being the leader, for the promotion of American values, sometimes ... transgresses the international norms’.<sup>21</sup> Some see it as bearing the characteristics of a potent ‘Social Contract’ in the political setup, and profoundly honourable in affecting its ‘perception processes’, whilst defining crises and articulating adequate responses. According to others, American exceptionalism, flanked by the legacy of its forefathers and the belief of being more value-oriented instead of system-oriented, has dominated the country’s response mechanism based upon ‘exceptionalist perceptions’.<sup>22</sup> Martin Lipset defines these as egalitarianism, individualism, populism and *laissez-faire*.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, fighting for a cause and searching for an element which would justify US commitment remains the *modus operandi* of its interventionist foreign policy. For example, ISIS represented an opportunity to atone for the stigma of Iraq, while re-establishing a sense of moral justification for its presence in the Middle East. President Barack Obama reiterated motives of the US engagement as:

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<sup>21</sup> Holsti, “Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy: Is it Exceptional?” 382-384. Being an ‘exceptionalist state’ entails: a) responsibility rather an obligation; b) international norms that govern the conduct of ordinary states are not applicable because its cause craves global responsibility; c) an instinctive element of observing a hostile world against its values; d) external enemies are uniquely necessary for its institutional structure; e) an element of innocence forms part of the character of the state, which streamlines hatred of the world against its unique values.

<sup>22</sup> These perceptions serve as the basis for Exceptionalism since US policymakers are deeply motivated and driven by their belief in doing God’s work.

<sup>23</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 32-37, 94-97. Also, Hilde Eliassen Restad, “Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science: US Foreign Policy and American Exceptionalism,” *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (2012): 53-76 (55-57), DOI: 10.1086/664586.

...support for Iraqi forces, strengthening the Iraqi government, providing humanitarian aid to Iraqi civilians, and doing their part in the fight against ISIL.<sup>24</sup>

Western liberal-democratic societies exist on the principle of dual relation i.e., their ‘social contract’ is consensual and free from any coercion. Consequently, foreign policy behaviour is deeply dependent on the second party of the contract and is the main motivational factor, which means that public opinion is key in the making of foreign policy.<sup>25</sup> Widmaier shows how self-created rhetoric sometimes constrains foreign policy choices of presidents.<sup>26</sup> Ideas that are radical or even a subtle deviation from that contractual political setup of the US enter the territory identified as inhumane at best and downright barbaric at worst; in particular, if that involves violation of human rights and liberties similar to what was exercised and exhibited by ISIS. Perhaps, this exceptional belief and character was best described by President Wilson:

We do not confine our enthusiasm for individual liberty and free national development to the incidents and movements of affairs which affect only ourselves. We feel it wherever there is a people that tries to walk in these difficult paths of independence and rights.<sup>27</sup>

Atrocities committed against the fundamentals of US exceptionalism, hence, bind the country to act, react and mobilise, while, launching a crusade – to do God’s work – hence, becoming a recurring

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<sup>24</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on Congressional Authorization to Train Syrian Opposition” (speech, Washington, D.C., September 18, 2014), *White House*, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/18/statement-president-congressional-authorization-train-syrian-opposition> .

<sup>25</sup> Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (New York: Allen Lane, 2014), 124-125.

<sup>26</sup> Wesley W. Widmaier, “Constructing Foreign Policy Crises: Interpretive Leadership in the Cold War and War on Terrorism,” *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2007):779-794, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2478.2007.00476.x.

<sup>27</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “Third Annual Message” (speech, Washington, D.C., December 7, 1915), *Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-7-1915-third-annual-message>.

element in foreign policy conduct.<sup>28</sup> Resultantly, approaches to issues that threaten its exceptionalism would be stiff, spontaneous and backed by the nation.<sup>29</sup> Neoclassical realists would argue that decision-makers can coax national tendencies in order to back their policy endeavours. Foreign policy, in relation is dependent on these decision-makers having acute knowledge of what the general mood of the public is. As far as ISIS is concerned, constant intervening played a large part in the formulation of policy. The war-weary US was not in mood to intervene militarily. National tendencies and moods need to be examined against systemic constraints, conformity in such cases leads to foreign policy acts backed by the national mood, financed by national resources and guided by stoic leadership. The story of the ISIS presents consideration of the forces regarded important in foreign policy decision-making.

From the US vantage point, Syria represents the epicentre of all its misery in the Middle East – namely the formation of a troika country's key strategic goal, not for itself, at least not primarily, but more for the appeasement of its Middle Eastern allies. Syria's al-Assad, being backed by Iran serves the latter's geopolitical with Iran and Hezbollah, culminating in 'the Shia Axis'.<sup>30</sup> Weakening this axis remains the purpose of assisting Hezbollah in Lebanon against Israel, as well as strengthening its position against Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states in the region. The US approached the crises in terms of drive for democracy, which, however, proved complicated because of the regional and international actors involved:

Syria is a clearinghouse for Mideast strife... Every Mideast player has a proxy or a natural ally or a natural enemy in Syria, so what happens there influences the security of every

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<sup>28</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1981), 13-30; and ———, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 305. Huntington calls it 'American Creed', which according to him constitutes the American political culture.

<sup>29</sup> Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, 282.

<sup>30</sup> Marin Katusa, *The Colder War: How the Global Energy Trade Slipped from America's Grasp* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 174.

country, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and its fellow Persian Gulf Oil producers.<sup>31</sup>

### **ISIS - A Short History**

Echevarria argues that:

Warfare has evolved through four generations: 1) the use of massed manpower; 2) firepower; 3) maneuver; and now 4) an evolved form of insurgency that employs all available networks - political, economic, social, military - to convince an opponent's decisionmakers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly.<sup>32</sup>

He maintained that after 9/11, al-Qaeda was fighting the US under the premise of Fourth Generation Warfare or 4GW.<sup>33</sup> However, it is also important to understand what enabled al-Qaeda (and later ISIS) to fight the US in a highly structured and organised manner. Outfits like these use various schools of thought to formulate their ideologies. For example, Abu Bakr Naji's 'The Management of Savagery'<sup>34</sup> in which Byman asserted is the strategy of creating and exploiting the weaknesses of Muslim countries by attacking wealthy infrastructure as a diversion; consequently, deploying to vulnerable regions, forming parallel governments there, and then, re-organising these satellite states under a single *Emir*. He referred to these as 'administrations of savagery.'<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Lia argued that Abu Musab al-Suri's 'Call to Global Islamic Resistance' helped establish Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq.<sup>36</sup> Abu Bakr

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 173-174.

<sup>32</sup> Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Fourth-Generation War and Other Myths*, report (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2005), v.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through Which the Umma Will Pass*, trans. William McCants (Cambridge: John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, Harvard University, 2006), <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know*® (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 53.

<sup>36</sup> Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2007), 7-9. Brynjar Lia, "Doctrines for Jihadi Terrorist

Naji advocated strategies of disruption, exhaustion, management of savagery and empowerment;<sup>37</sup> while al-Suri advocated ‘leaderless resistance’. Naji’s influence was focused on territorial acquisition used in a two-fold way: to manage savagery and lay the foundation of a neo-caliphate; and threaten the economic health of the enemy and demoralise its population. Al-Suri’s influence inspired Zarqawi’s independent operation and reluctance in showing allegiance to al-Qaeda’s leadership. The death of Zarqawi on June 7, 2006<sup>38</sup> changed the nature of the then al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).<sup>39</sup> Influenced by the strategy of ‘Decapitation’, his carcass was turned into a display as a symbol of repercussion in the face of US retaliation. However, this backfired and al-Zarqawi was extolled for his efforts, and the leadership of al-Qaeda paid tribute to his martyrdom with Ayman al-Zawahiri calling for AQI to establish an Islamic State (IS).

It took only a few months for the Mujahideen Shura Council to announce the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.<sup>40</sup> The successor of Zarqawi’s AQI Abu Hamza al-Muhajir pledged loyalty to the newly formed IS. The group remained loyal to al-Qaeda and transitorily operated according to Zawahiri’s advice. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over ISI in the aftermath of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi’s death in 2010. This marked the turning point in the course of ISI.<sup>41</sup> He re-organised ISIS by taking advantage of the

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Training.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 4 (2008): 518-542 (519), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550802257226>.

<sup>37</sup> Lia, “Doctrines for Jihadi Terrorist Training.” 527-532.

<sup>38</sup> Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus’ab Al-Suri*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016), 13-30. AQI was founded by Abu Musab al Zarqawi. Its activities were mostly centred in Iraq after the US invasion of 2003. There was an issue allegiance to al-Qaeda. However, US invasion aligned Zarqawi with al-Qaeda and AQI was born, which would later become the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), and later still, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Griffin, *Islamic State: Rewriting History* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), x.

<sup>41</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has a doctorate degree in Islamic Culture and Sharia Law from the University of Baghdad. Known as ‘polite, quiet and retiring’ to his friends who led a reportedly quiet life till the invasion of Iraq in 2003. He was detained at ‘Camp Bucca’ in Iraq. In 2009, he was released, became a hardened radical and joined the ISI ranks. The 2010 raid wiped out Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and the top brass of ISI. The group found in Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri, the religious authority and strategic success, which it aspired for its leader.

mistakes and slow reaction of the US and its allies in Iraq. He exploited the de-Ba'athification policy of Nuri al-Maliki and non-discriminatory approach of the US in dealing with radicals and casual insurgents.<sup>42</sup> The top brass of ISI was an alliance of Ba'athists and detainees of Camp Bucca.<sup>43</sup> According to General D. Stone, 'He (Baghdadi) knows that's where to find hard-core radicals.'<sup>44</sup> The ISI in July 2012 started 'Breaking down the Walls Campaign.' According to Barrett, 'at least eight of ISI's senior leadership members are former inmates from Camp Bucca.'<sup>45</sup>

Slowly and steadily, the organisation strengthened its position and in April 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (Support Front for the People of the Levant) which was previously a branch of ISI, now merged into one as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In 2013, ISIL maintained a sustained crusade against al-Nusra and other opposition forces (Liwa al-Tauheed and Ahrar al-Sham) in Raqqa and Aleppo. It declared Raqqa as its Syrian capital, and consolidated gains in the country alongside adjacent areas near the Iraq border. By August, it had forced the opposition forces out of Raqqa. The group managed Iraq with its territorial accession and an intricate web of 'tribal alliances' with Sunni Muslims.

To strengthen the acquired statehood and to formulate a state-structure, a caliphate was established headed by a caliph with its provinces (*wilayat*) headed by governors, assisted by local governments and administrative units with powerful ground strength, aggressive media strategy and complex economy. The so-called 'caliphate' generated its revenue from the local populations via taxes and oil smuggling.<sup>46</sup> The organisation considers the traditional ways of financing terrorism less useful and injected itself in the black market and smuggling routes. It also

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Barrett, *The Islamic State* (New York: The Soufan Group, 2014), 10-13. The then-Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki targeted and marginalised the Sunni majority which backfired with increased support for insurgents. The US took little heed of such policies which ultimately made ISIS strong and a formidable fighting force.

<sup>43</sup> Byman, *Al Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 116-120. Byman explored role of the Ba'ath Party criminals as well in the formation of ISIS.

<sup>44</sup> Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 33-35.

<sup>45</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 19.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

expanded its control in the Kurdish territory. The land of the Yazidis now belonged to them.<sup>47</sup>

### Threatened Genocide by ISIS: A ‘Moral Cause’ for the US

In June 2014, ISIS declared caliphate and called for the allegiance of all Muslims.<sup>48</sup> However, for the Salafists, it was their dealing with the Yazidis which highlighted their true colour. One particular episode transformed ISIS from an insurgent movement addressing the sympathies of the Sunni tribes, providing a platform to senior Iraqi military personnel and cashing in on the pro-Iranian approach of al-Maliki to the brutal terrorist outfit today. If al-Qaeda and other outlets are adhering to Salafism, ISIS alongside Salafism, are motivated by the ideology of *Takfir*. It was this ideological orientation that was threatening not only for the rest of the world, but also organisations like al-Qaeda.<sup>49</sup> Under this influence, ISIS declared Yazidis as worshipers of the devil. This declaration legitimised killing their men and enslavement of their women and children, threatening a ‘humanitarian crises’.<sup>50</sup> Members of the Yazidis who managed to take flee escaped to Mount Sinjar and lived there without food and water.<sup>51</sup> The organisation which former US President Barack Obama once called the ‘jayvee squad’,<sup>52</sup> compared to al-Qaeda of bin Laden, took over territories, claimed caliphate, declared war on the Middle East and threatened humanity at large. Suddenly, the jayvee squad

<sup>47</sup> Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 46-48. Yazidis were declared non-Muslims by ISIS, with countless Yazidi men killed and their women taken as slaves.

<sup>48</sup> Byman, *Al Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*, 49-53.

<sup>49</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “Al-Qaeda Disaffiliates with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2014), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-disaffiliates-with-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham>. Both Osama bin Laden and al-Zawahiri considered this ideological orientation as ‘worrying ideology’. *Takfir* is pronouncement of someone as non-Muslim, and is exploited by extremists as a ‘licence’ to kill them.

<sup>50</sup> Griffin, *Islamic State: Rewriting History*, 120-122. Griffin provided a detailed note on ISIS atrocities against Yazidi people and the humanitarian crises.

<sup>51</sup> Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 47.

<sup>52</sup> Glenn Kessler, “Spinning Obama’s Reference to Islamic State as a ‘JV’ Team,” *Washington Post*, September 3, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2014/09/03/spinning-obamas-reference-to-isis-as-a-jv-team/>.

became the ‘American problem’.<sup>53</sup> Against the background of video channelling, the UN declared ‘threatened genocide’ could not go unnoticed.<sup>54</sup> This was a calling for the US - the self-professed champion of humanitarian cause and international law.<sup>55</sup> The US opted for airstrikes together with Iraqi counterparts. The ground troops constituted of Peshmerga, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), its Syrian offshoot - the Peoples’ Protection Unit (YPG), and the Yazidis. However, the US could not circumvent its involvement against the mounting pressure ‘to do more about ISIS’. President Obama declared:

Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy the ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.<sup>56</sup>

This clarity of mission attracted more partners into the coalition - the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Australia, Canada and the Netherlands, alongwith Sunni-majority countries - Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, Turkey and United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>57</sup> The mantle of leadership fell upon the shoulders of the US, a recurring feature since the days of the Cold War. The glue that held the members of the coalition together was the ‘atrocities of the ISIS’ and a ‘threatened genocide’ i.e., the humanitarian cause.

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<sup>53</sup> Amy Davidson Sorokin, “Obama to Iraq: Your Problem Now,” *New Yorker*, June 13, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/obama-to-iraq-your-problem-now>. Also, David Remnick, “Going the Road: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama,” *New Yorker*, January 27, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>.

<sup>54</sup> Stephanie Nebehay, “Islamic State Committing ‘Staggering’ Crimes in Iraq: U.N. Report,” *Reuters*, October 2, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-un/islamic-state-committing-staggering-crimes-in-iraq-u-n-report-idUSKCN0HR0R120141002>.

<sup>55</sup> Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, 126. Henry Kissinger writes about this tilt in favour of humanitarian crises.

<sup>56</sup> David Hudson, “President Obama: We will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL,” *White House*, September 10, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/09/10/president-obama-we-will-degrade-and-ultimately-destroy-isil>.

<sup>57</sup> Justine Drennan, “Who Has Contributed What in the Coalition Against the Islamic State?” *Foreign Policy*, November 12, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/12/who-has-contributed-what-in-the-coalition-against-the-islamic-state/>.

The US, along with its coalition partners, began airstrikes against ISIS targets on September 23, 2014.<sup>58</sup> In the White House press releases since authorisation of the airstrikes, a frequent referral to the ‘humanitarian cause’ is noted, along with the notion that the war is now being fought in the name of ‘American values’:

Our comprehensive strategy against ISIL is harnessing all elements of American power, across our government - military, intelligence, diplomatic, economic, development and perhaps most importantly, the power of our values...<sup>59</sup>

### **Why Act Now?**

Against the milieu of the Iraqi invasion of 2003, the Obama Administration could not immediately venture into Syria’s Civil War, even at the expense of its allies in the Middle East. At the same time, the US could not keep itself aloof of the ‘atrocities of the ISIS’. American foreign policy, thus, kept its ‘moral cause’ intact while approaching ISIS. History teaches via analogy.<sup>60</sup> The experience of the Taliban government in Afghanistan in the last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> Century shaped the experience of the US regarding ultra-orthodox governments. Given its national security, the US could not allow such an organisation with an agenda of establishing ‘Caliphate’ to establish itself in a region of vital importance like the Middle East.

Foreign policy is the sum of national historical experiences.<sup>61</sup> World events and human rights violations shape tactical adjustments in policy options; and the IS provided the latter to the US.<sup>62</sup> Systemic forces

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<sup>58</sup> Martin Chulov, Spencer Ackerman, and Paul Lewis, “US Confirms 14 Air Strikes against Isis in Syria,” *Guardian*, September 23, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/23/us-launches-air-strikes-against-isis-targets-in-syria>.

<sup>59</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Progress in the Fight Against ISIL” (speech, Washington, D.C., July 6, 2015), *White House*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/06/remarks-president-progress-fight-against-isil>.

<sup>60</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 27.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>62</sup> Henry Kissinger explains the phenomenon of ‘Order and stability’ in International Relations, in almost all his works, most importantly, *A World Restored: Metternich*,

required the US to act against the possible threat, while violation of human rights challenged the exceptional character of the US' domestic structure.

The emergence of ISIS was a threat to the government of Iraq. The strategically significant areas of Syria and Iraq in the control of an extremist group could pose a security challenge to the US itself for which 9/11 is not a distant memory. It could also pose a threat to the stability established at the Israeli front and the international trade schemes operating through the region. Furthermore, accessibility to the Mediterranean Sea could make it a potential challenge as a terrorist entrée to international waters.

ISIS' pre-eminence is a corollary of the power vacuum created after the 2003 Iraq invasion. 'Replacement of authority' does not necessarily conform to the objective of American values – 'replacing hatred and resentment with democracy and hope' is necessary.<sup>63</sup> Invade, overthrow, install and rollback - a Machiavellian scheme - does not serve US exceptionalism,<sup>64</sup> which lies in restructuring society along its values. Organisations like ISIS exploit the weaknesses of provisional governments and get the backing of other actors whose interests are at stake. The superseded faction tries to regain control which increases the chances of conflicts. History replicates this phenomenon time and time again. Foreign policy, under the influence of an ideology, requires tactful assessment on the part of its practitioners. The social makeup of the state, alongwith the regional political configuration, needs to be kept in mind. Lessons of history need to be remembered - prolonged wars are not good

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*Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace: 1812-1822* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957); ———. *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994). His World Order explains in detail the concept of order in international relations, traces the concepts of national interests, balance of power, and realpolitik in detail.

<sup>63</sup> George W. Bush, "Speech at the National Endowment for Democracy" (speech, Washington, D.C., October 6, 2005), *Presidentialrhetoric.com*, <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/10.06.05.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Restad, "Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science: US Foreign Policy and American Exceptionalism." The US would not follow the precedents of other great powers as it is on a different path of history. This belief too forms part of American Exceptionalism.

for a nation.<sup>65</sup> Thus, taking the country back to war in a region from where it completed its withdrawal three years earlier would go against the principles of pragmatism. Accordingly, the policy of ‘air-raids’ was adopted, against the backdrop of a statesman who came to office on his anti-war stance and the fear of elongation of an already complex issue.<sup>66</sup> To an organisation, seeking an order based on (religious) purity<sup>67</sup> contrary to internationally agreed legitimate concepts of international community, atrocities are the tools of operation.

Tackling organisations like these requires an all-comprehensive strategy. Wiping out safe havens and targeting its leadership would not eliminate ISIS - cut off one head, two more would grow. Involvement in the region, integrating various factions, harmonising interests of key actors in the region and an ensured US backing could possibly dry down the extremist surge fuelling the ranks of ISIS.

Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria reportedly used chemical weapons such as Sarin nerve gas against what it called ‘Syrian rebels’ on April 4, 2017. The attack resulted in the deaths of 80 people.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, US President Donald Trump ordered the military to respond since the chemical attack was a clear violation of the 1995 Geneva Protocol. The US Mediterranean Fleet fired 59 BGM-109 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the Shayrat Airfield in Homs, Syria. Russian news reported that only 23 made it to the target area.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Restad, “Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science: US Foreign Policy and American Exceptionalism.”

<sup>66</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement of the President” (speech, Washington, D.C., August 7, 2014), *White House*, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/07/statement-president>. President Barack Obama expressed these views a number of times, e.g. his August 7, 2014 statement.

<sup>67</sup> Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, 122. Kissinger’s thesis against the Islamic conception of order is that ‘Purity, not stability, is the guiding principle of this (Islamic) conception of world order.’

<sup>68</sup> “Assad Forces behind Deadly Syria Sarin Attack - UN,” *BBC News*, October 27, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41771133>.

<sup>69</sup> “‘Low Efficiency’: Only 23 Tomahawk Missiles out of 59 Reached Syrian Airfield, Russian MoD Says,” *RT World News*, April 7, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/383858-syria-us-strike-inefficient/>.

## Conclusion

The article covered three different yet interrelated issues i.e., US exceptionalism, its role in the country's foreign policy conduct, and, most importantly, its articulation in relation to ISIS. The theoretical part explained the nature of international system and state and described the attitude of foreign policy decision-makers. The authors briefly demonstrated how the US applies exceptionalism in its foreign policy, how an issue or crises is translated into a national security threat and how US foreign policy practitioners find its solution in their value system.

ISIS lost its capital and centre of gravity due to the US-led military strikes under the influence of exceptionalism;<sup>70</sup> while the outfit has become weak, the logic behind drawing the 'calling for a cause' to fight against it has established a moral obligation for the US' foreign policy decision-makers to destroy its splinter cells and prevent its future rise.

President Trump's military actions against al-Assad in response to the latter's use of chemical weapons were guided by US exceptionalism - his belief in the country's uniqueness articulated in his 'America First' policy. The Iraq invasion tore apart the 9/11 national consensus in the US. Under the slogan of change, Barack Obama campaigned against the Iraq war and pulled out US forces in 2011.<sup>71</sup> However, an invader often fails to anticipate post-war scenarios. Failure to anticipate this resulted in the emergence of 'al-Qaeda in Iraq' eventually declaring itself the Islamic State. Exploiting the weaknesses of the transitional authorities and Machiavellian strategies of the coalition partners, ISIS expanded its influence in Iraq and Syria. Influenced by the Salafist/*Takfiri* ideologies, the organisation took its 'management of savagery' to a different level. It established a pseudo-state, with a strict interpretation of *Shariah* (Islamic law), a relatively working economy, a system of civil institutions and

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<sup>70</sup> Muhammad Ali Baig, "The End of American Exceptionalism," *Daily Times*, June 4, 2018, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/248475/the-end-of-american-exceptionalism/>. Baig argued the uniqueness of US Military to be the third strand of American Exceptionalism.

<sup>71</sup> Mark Landler, "U.S. Troops to Leave Iraq by Year's End, Obama Says," *New York Times*, October 21, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/world/middleeast/president-obama-announces-end-of-war-in-iraq.html>.

banks based on violence as a tool of governance. Declarations against the Yazidis was a fierce decision which spurred a flurry of action in the international community against it<sup>72</sup> since the international community and the UN feared a threatened genocide. Had the US opted for deterrence and containment of ISIS earlier, the domino effect of ISIS might not have happened – especially in Syria whose city Raqqa acted as its capital. During the Obama administration, US Congress did not back action against ISIS. Consequently, according to Henry Kissinger, events can occur whose consequences - such as genocide - are so horrendous that they tilt the scale towards intervention beyond considerations of strategy.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, the US propagated the removal of Assad at the international level. This strategy was viewed in strategic terms, which was criticised by China and Russia. Domestically, against the background of the Iraq and Afghan war, the American public was not supportive of the endeavour. Had the involvement against Syria been a strategic or political choice, the US would have taken its allies into confidence – especially Saudi Arabia. Had Russia remained at the centre of US foreign policy, the latter would have deployed its troops on the ground. It might even have acted against the Kremlin in Georgia in 2008 at the outbreak of the South Ossetia War and against the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. But the country’s involvement against ISIS represents the moralistic elements in its foreign policy. ISIS, while pursuing the strategies outlined by Naji,<sup>74</sup> and Al Suri<sup>75</sup> – was a terrorist organisation involved in killing of non-combatants, propagating an ideology that was hostile to religious freedom and pluralism, supporting a form of government that required utmost obedience, posed a threat to ‘American values’. Thus, the US acted. ■

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<sup>72</sup> Elise Labott and Tal Kopan, “John Kerry: ISIS Responsible for Genocide,” *CNN.com*, March 18, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/17/politics/us-iraq-syria-genocide/index.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, 95-96.

<sup>74</sup> Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma Will Pass*.

<sup>75</sup> Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus’ab Al-Suri*; Lia, “Doctrines for Jihadi Terrorist Training.”