Territory, Sovereignty, and New Statehood in the Middle East and North Africa

Ariel I. Ahram

The Middle East Journal, Volume 71, Number 3, Summer 2017, pp. 345-362 (Article)

Published by Middle East Institute

Territory, Sovereignty, and New Statehood in the Middle East and North Africa

Ariel I. Ahram

This article examines the interaction between territory, sovereignty, and statehood in the Middle East and North Africa. Various groups have aspired — and have failed — to become states since the contemporary regional system's inception after World War I. Since the 2011 uprisings, movements claiming territory and sovereignty have emerged or become more viable throughout the region, including the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), Rojava, Cyrenaica, Azawad, and the Kurdistan Regional Government. Each poses different challenges to the regional system and holds out different hopes for rectifying historical missteps in state-building.

Strolling amid the rubble of an abandoned military post somewhere along the Syrian-Iraqi border in 2014, a fighter known as Abu Safiyya from Chile had reason to boast. "This is the so-called border of Sykes-Picot," he said, mistakenly referring to the secret 1916 agreement that proposed dividing the Ottoman Empire into British, French, and Russian spheres of influence. "Praise God, we don't recognize it and we will never recognize it. This is not the first border we will break. God willing, we will break all the borders." Where Iraq's and Syria's red, white, and black tricolors had flown side by side like fraternal twins, now the black flag of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) stood alone.[1]

ISIS is not alone in seeking to break borders. For many across the region, the downfall of the Sykes-Picot agreement has become something of an obsession. Even though the agreement itself was largely unrelated to the region's present political boundaries, "Sykes-Picot" is a symbol; an emblem of all that is wrong with the Middle East's regional state system.[2] Imperial conspiracies, invasions, and occupations rendered Middle Eastern and North African states artificial, their borders failing to reflect underlying cultural, economic, and political realities. The sovereignty of Middle Eastern and North African states has always been tenuous. While they enjoyed recognition in the international arena, at home their legitimacy was constantly in peril.[3]

Ariel I. Ahram is an associate professor at the Virginia Tech School of Public and International Affairs. He thanks workshop participants at Princeton University, the University of Michigan, the American University in Cairo, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars for their comments on this paper.

1. Islamic State of [*sic*] Iraq and al-Sham, "The End of Sykes-Picot," Al Hayat (Iraq), uploaded on June 29, 2014, to Aaron Y. Zelin's *Jihadology* website, http://jihadology.net/2014/06/29/al-hayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-the-end-of-sykes-picot/.

2. Eugene Rogan, "A Century after Sykes-Picot," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, No. 19 (Fall 2015), pp. 99–109; James Gelvin, "Don't Blame Sykes-Picot," Oxford University Press Blog, February 7, 2015, https://blog.oup.com/2015/02/dont-blame-sykes-picot/.

3. See, for example, Henri J. Barkey, "The Middle East's Chaotic Future," *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2015, https://wapo.st/1GfKMhG; Itamar Rabinovich, "The End of Sykes-Picot? Reflections on the Prospects of the Arab State System," Saban Center at Brookings, Middle East Memo No. 32 (Feb. 2014); Robin Wright, "Imagining a Remapped Middle East," *The New York Times*, September 28, 2013, https://nyti.ms/1hLZ4dq.

HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.3751/71.3.11

Yet despite prophecies of an age of peace and stability once these historical injustices would be rectified, the birth and death of states remain remarkably rare. At both the regional and global levels, patterns of mutual interaction have augmented the norms of Westphalian sovereignty, rendering the existing constellation of sovereign states in the region more or less immutable.[4] Domestically, even the most ill-conceived states have now had decades to impress their official versions of nationalism upon their citizens. Citizens, in turn, have acclimated to states' demands.[5] And when persuasion has faltered, repression has been at the ready.[6]

Yet the coercive bedrocks of many states appear to have been shattered over the course of the past decade. Syria, Yemen, and Libya are wracked by civil war. Iraq, Tunisia, and Egypt have seen significant areas of territory fall from state control. Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan are buckling under the strain of massive refugee inflows from surrounding conflict zones. Meanwhile, from Kurdistan to the Sahil, from Yemen to Cyrenaica, the structures of Middle Eastern sovereignty are in the midst of the most significant transformation since their inception.

This article examines the crisis and transformation of Middle Eastern and North African states from the perspective of political geography, focusing on different kinds of aspiring states and their assertions of territorial control. The article makes three main arguments concerning the historical development of states in the region: First, various forms of "phantom" states have always lurked in the shadows of the regional system.[7] However, a combination of physical repression and normative exclusion kept these aspiring states from disrupting the state system. Second, the recent crisis has given impetus to new and variegated state-like entities. Like the de jure states they try to supplant, these aspiring state-makers exhibit a particularly extroverted approach to claiming sovereignty and are dependent on extra-regional actors for critical material and symbolic support. Third, the territorial dynamics of interaction between sovereign states and aspiring states are simultaneously conflictual and cooperative. Even among ostensible enemies, there are significant degrees of exchange and communication. Over the long term, this could mitigate the drive for all out competition and instead foster equilibriums in which de facto and de jure powers cohabitate.

SOVEREIGNTY AND TERRITORIAL CONTROL IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Territoriality is a central feature of sovereignty in the modern state system. Max Weber's oft-quoted definition of statehood hinges on this exact point: "a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physi-*

4. Michael N. Barnett, "Sovereignty, Nationalism, and Regional Order in the Arab States System," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (July 1995), pp. 479–510; Fred H. Lawson, *Constructing International Relations in the Arab World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

5. Sami Zubaida, "The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq" *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (May 2002), pp. 205–15.

6. Jason Brownlee, ". . . And Yet They Persist: Explaining Survival and Transition in Neopatrimonial Regimes," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Sept. 2002), pp. 35–63.

7. Daniel Byman and Charles King, "The Mystery of Phantom States," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2012), pp. 44–57.

cal force within a given territory. Note that 'territory' is one of the characteristics of the state."[8] Statehood represents a specifically territorialized mode of power. States exert domination over rigidly bordered spaces. As Peter Sahlins related, "a political boundary is the point at which a state's territorial competence finds its ultimate expression. States are defined by their exclusive jurisdiction over a delimited territory; and the boundaries of their territorial competence define the sovereignty of a state."[9] This territorial characteristic differentiates states from other forms of political authority. Empires, for example, operate with more flexible and permeable frontiers.[10] Religious authorities, too, exert a networked, extraterritorial control over their adherents worldwide.[11] Inter-state borders simultaneously separate and link sovereign states together. By mutual consideration and recognition of their territorial authority, sovereign states collectively form an international society.[12]

Yet, like many aspects of statehood, states' territorial consolidation is empirically variant, not ontologically fixed.[13] Critiquing the assumptions linking sovereignty to territoriality, John Agnew highlighted non-territorial exercises of state power "in scattered pockets connected by flows across space-spanning networks." Territorially defined forms of power inevitably coexist with more spatially diffuse symbolic and material networks of exchange and commerce. [14] Though nearly every space on the planet has been legally designated to fall under some state's sovereign rule, in practice the exercise of state power is often far more limited.

Theories of sovereignty increasingly focus on the disjuncture between de jure designation of territory and de facto territorial control, suggesting different forms of sovereignty and, consequently, different kinds of statehood. On one hand are de jure states, which have juridical standing in international society but lack the ability to consolidate their control over significant parts of their designated territory. The most extreme examples are failed states, which have no effective sway over their territory, yet still enjoy international recognition.[15] On the other hand are de facto states that lack international recognition but exercise real territorial control.[16]

8. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation" (1918), in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 78.

9. Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 2–3.

10. Friedrich Kratochwil, "Of Systems, Boundaries, and Territoriality: An Inquiry into the Formation of the State System," *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Oct. 1986), pp. 27–52; Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World*, second edition (New York: Wiley, 2004), pp. 12–36.

11. John Agnew, *Globalization and Sovereignty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), pp. 50–51.

12. Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 316.

13. J. P. Nettl, "The State as a Conceptual Variable," *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (July 1968), pp. 559–92.

14. John Agnew, "Sovereignty Regimes: Territoriality and State Authority in Contemporary World Politics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (2005), p. 441.

15. Robert H. Jackson introduced this concept with the term *quasi-state*, see his *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

16. Nina Caspersen, *Unrecognized States: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Modern International System* (New York: Wiley, 2013); Pål Kolstø, "The Sustainability and Future of Unrecognized Quasi-States," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (Nov. 2006), pp. 723–40.

De facto states have been a perennial feature of the international system, but they proliferated after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new self-proclaimed independent states like Transnistria, South Ossetia, and (until 2000) Chechnya. Initially, de facto states seemed to be little more than glorified criminal enterprises — dens for smuggling, racketeering, and hostage-taking.[17] The leaders of these nascent states, though, portrayed themselves as national liberators, claiming territory in the name of self-determination and independence. Just as de jure states need the international community to maintain any semblance of territorial control, de facto states have been similarly extroverted. In fact, many de facto states rely on international patrons for military and economic support. They deliberately appeal for recognition by the international community as responsible candidates for admission to the "club" of states. Nina Caspersen wrote that de facto states tend to be "weak, poor, and very corrupt, but this is not all that different from the countries of which they are formally part."[18] Regardless of whether a de facto state exhibits greater territorial control than its de jure parent or has historical justification for its independence, the international community has generally been loath to permit the breakup of existing states or to admit new states to the club. The weight of international norms strongly favors the status quo, making both the birth of new states and the death of old ones, however decrepit, extremely rare.[19]

Appreciating the variegated relationship between territory and sovereignty is vital for understanding the current crisis in the Middle Eastern and North African state system. Modern Arab states have often been caricatured as artificial or foreign implantations.[20] Certainly, there have been grave incongruences between political boundaries and the networks of cultural, economic, and ideological affinities that connect the populations living in their territories. Michael Hudson used distinctly spatial terminology to discuss the challenges facing the current constellation of Arab states.[21] First have been horizontal challenges, namely those posed to a state's territorial control and specific political boundaries. Misbegotten states have often incorporated large minorities or diasporic communities that harbor their own irredentist or separatist ambitions and feel little allegiance to the often-novel state. The long-thwarted Kurdish and Berber (Amazigh) nationalist movements are cases in point.

17. Charles King, "Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States," *World Politics*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (July 2001), p. 528; Timothy W. Luke and Gerard Toal, "The Fraying Modern Map: Failed States and Contraband Capitalism," *Geopolitics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1998), pp. 28–29.

18. Caspersen, *Unrecognized States*, pp. 21–22. See also Rebecca Richards and Robert Smith, "Statebuilding and the Politics of Non-Recognition," in *Recognition in International Relations: Rethinking an Political Concept in a Global Context*, eds. Christopher Daase et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 165.

19. Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: the Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Bridget Coggins, *Power Politics and State Formation in the Twentieth Century: The Dynamics of Recognition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Mikulas Fabry, *Recognizing States: International Society and the Establishment of New States since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

20. There is some hyperbole in this characterization, see Lisa Blaydes, "State Building in the Middle East," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 20 (May 2017), pp. 487–504.

21. Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977).

Second have been the vertical challenges involving disputes over the formula for legitimate rule in a particular state. Even if a population accepts a given territorial configuration, they might still regard the apparatus of rule as illegitimate. For instance, despite suffering significant political marginalization and having strong sectarian ties with groups across borders, Shi'i communities in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf have largely come to accept the state they live in as their "final homeland."[22] Their political mobilization has been geared toward achieving sociopolitical status within each state commensurate with their imagined demographic weight. The final type of challenger sought to alter the international system root and branch. Communism, in its earliest internationalist incarnation, sought to replace the territorial state system. In the Arab world, both pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism brought into question the legitimacy of the entire system of independent and sovereign states. Such challengers sought to reinvigorate transnational networks of cultural and religious authority as an alternative to state-based, territorially specific power.[23]

These often-interlinking dilemmas hampered efforts to establish legitimate and effective states. Indeed, Middle Eastern and North African states generally struggle to transition from despotic to infrastructural power and to substitute administrative authority for brute force.[24] Though many states have tried to offer their populations a measure of social protection and redistribution in return for political quiescence, such authoritarian bargains are never robust and grow shabbier with time. Violence has remained the mainstay of governance in the region.[25]

Research on regional state formation often fails to annunciate specific challengers, narrowly focusing on the political "winners" — those that actually managed to obtain sovereignty and become states.[26] The literature tends to neglect, however, the losers and also-rans that came to naught. But just as any account of European state formation would be incomplete without discussing the failure of Kingdom of Naples or the Hanseatic League alongside the success of Italy and Germany, the

22. The term "final homeland" (*watan niha'i*) was used in Fouad Ajami's discussion of Lebanese Shi'a in his *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 187. See also Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Pres, 2008).

23. On pan-Arabism, see Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). On pan-Islam, see Nelly Lahoud and Anthony H. Johns (eds.), *Islam in World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2012); James Mellon, "Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism and Inter-State Relations in the Arab World," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2002), pp. 1–15.

24. Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence: Volume Two of a Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 18; Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," *European Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Nov. 1984), pp. 185–213.

25. Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1996).

26. Rolf Schwarz, "The Political Economy of State-Formation in the Arab Middle East: Rentier States, Economic Reform, and Democratization," *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2008): pp. 599–621; Raymond Hinnebusch, "Toward a Historical Sociology of State Formation in the Middle East," *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Fall 2010), pp. 201–16; Roger Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

same could be said of the understanding of the evolution of states in the Middle East and North Africa.[27]

Although conventional wisdom holds that European colonial powers preordained the course of state formation in the Middle East and North Africa, there was significant contestation surrounding the agglomeration of state power. David S. Patel identified anywhere from 29 to 62 now-defunct autonomous territorial polities that have appeared in the region since 1914.[28] Sean Yom estimated the number of "vanished" states in the region to be well over 100 since the late 19th century.[29] Nearly all of these cases have been reduced to historiographical footnotes, if not forgotten entirely.[30] Along with these apparent failures in state-building were states-within-states that carved out zones of territorial control, such as the various "Fatah-lands" established by Palestinian militants in Jordan and Lebanon in the 1960s and 70s.[31] Finally, there have been a small number of enduring de facto states, like the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan Region, that have managed to hold on to slim territorial power.

Three important patterns appear when these "phantoms" are examined as a whole. First, their rise is intimately connected to war. De facto states typically appear where and when state authority breaks down. Thus, just as civil wars push weak de jure states to fail, they hasten the formation of de facto states. The Lebanese Civil War helped solidify Palestinian enclaves and later Hizbullah-controlled zones in the Biqa' Valley and elsewhere. Similarly, Iraq's March 1991 uprisings following the Gulf War birthed the autonomous Kurdistan Region.

Secondly, de facto states tend to be heavily dependent on international patronage and rents. De facto states hold out the promise of restructuring the political map to better accord with notions of popular sovereignty. Yet outside powers provide a sustaining lifeline to these statehood claimants. For example, the short-lived Republic of Kurdistan (known as the Mahabad republic) relied on military and economic assistance from the Soviet Union after it declared its independence in 1946. It collapsed within months once the Soviets withdrew their support. Similarly, the All-Palestine Government, established during the 1948–49 Arab-Israeli war, was reduced to an Egyptian

27. Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 4, 11; Norman Davies, *Vanished Kingdoms: The Rise and Fall of States and Nations* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

28. David Siddhartha Patel, "Remembering Failed States in the Middle East," Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) (May 4, 2015), https://pomeps.org/2015/05/04/remembering-failed-states-in-the-middle-east/.

29. Sean Yom, e-mail message to author, October 8, 2015.

30. For examples, see Joshua Teitelbaum, *The Rise and Fall of the Hashemite Kingdom of Arabia* (London: Hurst, 2001); William Eagleton, Jr., *The Kurdish Republic of 1946* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963); Avi Shlaim, "The Rise and Fall of the All-Palestine Government in Gaza," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Autumn 1990), pp. 37–53; Madawi Al Rasheed, *Politics in an Arabian Oasis: The Rashidi Tribal Dynasty* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1991).

31. The term refers to the enclaves administered by Fatah (an Arabic reverse acronym for *Harakat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini*, the Palestinian National Liberation Movement) and similar movements. Adam Ramadan and Sara Fregonese, "Hybrid Sovereignty and the State of Exception in the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, Vol. 107, No. 4 (2017), pp. 949–63. For a detailed account of the emergence of Palestinian ministates in the camps, see Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for a State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 458–59, 559.

puppet with only nominal command in the Gaza Strip. It was finally shuttered in 1959 on Cairo's orders. Subsequently, Palestinian factions across the region tried to carve out states-within-states and struggled to get outside support. During the Lebanese Civil War, Palestinian groups and other belligerents financed their operations by arms- and drug-smuggling.[32] To the west, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic was heavily dependent on Algeria's military and financial backing. Although it was admitted in 1982 to the Organisation of African Unity (a forerunner of the African Union), most of the international community shunned it.[33]

The third pattern that can be discerned in a study of the Middle East's de facto states is that their neutralization involved regional and global acts of suppression. International and regional institutions, like the Arab League and the United Nations, created a mutually reinforcing web of recognition and support that helped protect the sovereignty of member states.[34] During the Cold War in particular, superpowers established patron-client relationships with the regimes that simultaneously buttressed states' juridical sovereignty and bulked up their security apparatuses (even as they undermined clients' volition and autonomy within the international system as whole).[35] A tacit concert of regional and extra-regional states worked to contain crises and manage regional spillover. Neighbors tended to exploit and fill voids of authority through proxy wars or invasion, as occurred in North Yemen in the 1960s, Oman in the 1970s, Jordan during the Black September uprising of 1970, and during the decades-long civil war in Lebanon. As in early modern Europe, states could emerge more durable and more institutionalized as a result of these struggles.[36] Unlike in Europe, though, internationally recognized states were rarely truly and definitively eliminated in the Middle East and North Africa.[37] Despite its perceived illegitimate conception, the regional state system by and large endured, and individual states prevailed. The regional system was in a

32. Rex Brynen, "The Politics of Exile: The Palestinians in Lebanon," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1990), pp. 204–27; Cheryl A. Rubenberg, "The Civilian Infrastructure of the Palestine Liberation Organization: An Analysis of the PLO in Lebanon until June 1982," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Spring 1983), pp. 54-78; Jonathan V. Marshall, *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War, and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, pp. 458–9, 559.

33. Anouar Boukhars, "Simmering Discontent in the Western Sahara," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), Carnegie Papers No. 138 (Mar. 2012); David Lynn Price, *The Western Sahara* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979), p. 30.

34. Clovis Maksoud, "Diminished Sovereignty, Enhanced Sovereignty: United Nations–Arab League Relations at 50," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Autumn 1995), pp. 582–94; Gamil Matar and Ali al-Din Hilal, النظام الإقليمي العربي: دراسة في العلاقات السياسية العربية [The Arab regional system: A study in Arab political relations] (Beirut: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabi, 1983).

35. Sean L. Yom, *From Resilience to Revolution: How Foreign Interventions Destabilize the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

36. Michael N. Barnett, *Confronting the Costs of War: Military Power, State, and Society in Egypt and Israel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Steve Heydemann (ed.), *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

37. Boaz Atzili, *Good Fences, Bad Neighbors: Border Fixity and International Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Reinoud Leenders, "Strong States in a Troubled Region: Anatomies of a Middle Eastern Regional Conflict Formation" *Comparative Social Research*, Vol. 27 (2010), pp. 171–95; Rex Brynen, "Palestine and the Arab State System: Permeability, State Consolidation and the *Intifada*," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Sept. 1991), pp. 595–621.

sense self-righting and self-reproducing. Instead of the handful of capable, competent, and territorial states that emerged in early modern Europe, though, the Middle East and North Africa were on a trajectory toward armored mediocrity, composed of states that were at once militarily strong but lacking infrastructure and territorial control.[38]

THE (NON-)STATE SYSTEM SINCE 2011

The outbreak of revolutionary movements between 2010 and 2011 represented the gravest challenge to the Middle Eastern and North African state system since the regional system first crystallized in the 1910s and 1920s.[39] The Arab Spring, as it became known, was a critical juncture — a sudden slackening in the restraints that had held the state system together.[40] Regimes and individual leaders were crippled; territorial control eviscerated. The crisis spread quickly across the region. Due to its traditional abhorrence of power vacuums, which could become safe havens or founts for Islamist terrorism, the United States would have seemed to be the most eager to shore up regional states.[41] However, chastened by its misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US was reluctant to commit its own ground forces, leaving room for Russia — as well as regional actors like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran — to hold greater sway.

Three distinctive forms of de facto states emerged in this period, each distinguished by their vision of statehood and aspiration for territorial control.[42] The impetus for the initial mobilization geared toward unseating autocratic regimes. Early contestation was vertically oriented, challenging regimes but leaving territorial definitions unopposed. Opposition forces organized themselves into distinctive transitional political bodies, such as the Syrian National Council (SNC; *al-Majlis al-Watani al-Suri*) and Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC; *al-Majlis al-Watani al-Intiqali*). Even though much of their personnel came from diaspora communities, these "governments-in-waiting," as Glen Rangwala dubbed them, claimed to embody the true will of the people.[43] In the face of significant regime retrenchment and counterattack, governments-in-waiting quickly took on the trappings of de facto statehood, constructing executive and legislative bodies, deploying their own armed forces, and seeking territorial beachheads of "liberated" territory.

The most important achievements of these vertical challengers were in the diplomatic arena. Drawing from the 1990s/2000s–era discourse of humanitarian intervention, they argued that the international community has a responsibility to protect people

38. Ariel I. Ahram and Ellen Lust, "The Decline and Fall of the Arab State," *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2016), pp. 7–34.

39. Jonathan Wyrtzen, "Reimagining Political Space: Empires, Revolt, and Competitive State Building in the Middle East and North Africa in the 1920s" (paper presentation, London School of Economics, March 2015).

40. Hillel David Soifer, "The Causal Logic of Critical Junctures," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 12 (Dec. 2012), 1,572–97.

41. Barak Mendelsohn, *Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terrorism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

42. On the differing forms of territorial attachment and staking claims, see Avery Kolers, *Land, Conflict, and Justice: A Political Theory of Territory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 102.

43. Glen Rangwala, "The Creation of Governments-in-Waiting: The Arab Uprisings and Legitimacy in the International System," *Geoforum*, Vol. 66 (Nov. 2015), pp. 215–23.

from the atrocities and war crimes being committed by the entrenched regimes. These governments-in-waiting further appealed to the international community for support and recognition as their states' sole legitimate governing bodies, positioning themselves as repositories of the national will and popular sovereignty. The SNC's 2012 National Covenant for a New Syria (*Wathiqat al-'ahd al-watani li-Suriya al-mustaqbal*) highlighted the "crimes and heinous acts" of the autocracy of President Bashar al-Asad, in contrast to what the SNC declared Syria to be: "a civil, democratic, pluralistic, independent ,and free state. As a sovereign country, it will determine its own future based only on the collective will of its people. Sovereignty will belong in its entirety only to the Syrian people who will exercise it through democracy."[44] Libya's NTC made similar efforts to elicit Western intervention against the regime of Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi.[45]

Governments-in-waiting also lent the opposition an amenable, technocratic face. Many prominent members were fluent in English (or other European languages) and boasted degrees from Western universities. Importantly, this reassured Western governments that these opposition groups were not stalking horses for Islamism and that future regimes would fit into a liberal mold of governance. As with many other de facto states, governments-in-waiting portrayed themselves as responsible members in international society, in marked contrast to the regimes they sought to oust.

As state powers faltered across the region, though, horizontal challengers also came to the fore. Rather than contesting power over existing states, horizontal challengers sought to carve out the territorial foundations of new states. Though not always explicitly secessionist, these movements could roundly be called separatist; under the banner of federalism and the devolution of political authority, they took unilateral actions to create alternative political entities that consolidated their coercive and administrative control within their territories.[46] Horizontal challengers pointed to past historical injustices and prior denials of claims to self-determination and statehood to justify their separatist bids. They also, though, sought to demonstrate their usefulness to the international community. In Yemen, the Southern Resistance (*al-Muqawama al-Janubiyya*) movement became a key element backing the internationally recognized government that operated from 'Aden following the invasion of Sana'a by the Huthi insurgency in 2014. The alliance between the Southern Resistance and President 'Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi proved only temporary, as the separatists continued to demand independence for the south and resisted the central government's assertion of control over 'Aden.[47]

Similarly, the federalist movement in Cyrenaica (or Barqa), eastern Libya, demands restoration of the autonomy the region enjoyed under Libya's first constitution and, before that, as an independent Sanusi emirate. Federalists particularly chafe at the possibility of falling under the domination of Tripolitania. In 2012 and 2013,

---

44. Available as "SNC: National Covenant for a New Syria," Carnegie Middle East Center (CMEC), *Diwan* (blog), June 24, 2012, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48423?lang=en.

45. Christopher S. Chivvis, "Libya and the Future of Liberal Intervention," *Survival*, Vol. 54, No. 6 (2012), pp. 69–92.

46. Donald L. Horowitz, "Patterns of Ethnic Separatism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Apr. 1981), pp. 165–95.

47. Sana Uqba, "Yemen's 'Third Government' Emerges in Southern Yemen," *The New Arab*, May 11, 2017, www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2017/5/11/yemens-third-government-emerges-in-southern-yemen.

federalist factions defied the transitional government and the (now-defunct) General National Congress (*al-Mu'tamar al-Watani al-'Amm*), boycotting the election, attacking polling stations, and seizing key oil installations to bolster their demands for constitutional revisions. Since 2014, the federalists have forged an uneasy alliance with the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (*Majlis al-Nuwwab al-Libi*) and Khalifa Haftar, the rogue military commander waging a campaign against Islamist-backed elements in Tripoli and Misrata.[48]

Further south, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA, from the French *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad*) declared independence from Mali in 2012. The MNLA, composed mainly of Touareg fighters from Libya, specifically claimed that "France [had] attached Azawad without its consent to the Malian state" and that Touaregs faced abuse and even genocide at the hands of the Malian government. Importantly, the MNLA sought to assure the international community of its respect for all neighboring borders and its intent to fight against al-Qa'ida and other jihadist groups.[49]

The most successful horizontal challengers have been Kurdish nationalists. Making up for Kurds' diplomatic and military shortfalls at the birth of the regional state system following World War I, Kurdish leaders have jumped at the opportunity to substantiate alternative state institutions.[50] The autonomous Kurdistan Region in Iraq represents the most consolidated and state-like of the region's de facto states. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) divided power in the region after breaking away from Iraqi president Saddam Husayn's grip in 1991. In the 1990s, the two Kurdish movements were key allies to the Iraqi National Congress, avowing their commitment to Iraq's territorial integrity.[51] They enjoyed strong support from the US, particularly the no-fly zone, which blocked Saddam from reasserting sovereign control over the region and thereby carved out an area for Kurdish state-building. After Saddam's unseating more than a decade later, the new Iraqi constitution made this arrangement official by designating the governorates of Erbil, Sulaymaniyya, and Dohuk as an autonomous, federal region. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) held itself out as a bastion of stability and liberal democracy, despite evident corruption and a lackluster human rights record.[52] The KDP leadership even began building bridges to Ankara, which had long opposed

48. Sean Kane, "Barqa Reborn? Eastern Regionalism and Libya's Political Transition" in *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, eds. Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 205–28.

49. Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad, "Declaration of Independence of Azawad (English Translation)," *Political Geography Now*, April 6, 2012, www.polgeonow.com/2012/04/declaration-of-independence-of-azawad.html; Douglas Livermore, "The Case for Azawad: Rectifying the Past to Save the Future in Northern Africa," *African Security Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2013), pp. 282–93.

50. Karen Culcasi, "Locating Kurdistan: Contextualizing the Region's Ambiguous Boundaries," in *Borderlines and Borderlands: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation-State*, eds. Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), pp. 107–20.

51. Toby Dodge, "Iraqi Transitions: From Regime Change to State Collapse," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4–5 (2005), pp. 705–21; Yossi Shain and Ariel I. Ahram, "The Frontiers of Loyalty: Do They Really Change?" *Orbis*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Autumn 2003), pp. 667–71.

52. Kawa Hassan, "Kurdistan's Politicized Society Confronts a Sultanistic System," CMEC Paper No. 54 (Aug. 2015), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_54_Hassan_11.pdf.

any inkling of Kurdish independence. At the same time, though, the KRG in Erbil sparred with the Iraqi central government in Baghdad over the allocation of oil revenue and control over the oil-rich region of Kirkuk.[53]

When ISIS moved on Mosul in summer 2014, the KRG leadership saw a chance to bolt from a sinking Iraq. The KRG's Peshmerga security force moved southward, seizing disputed territory around Kirkuk, which Kurds had long claimed as their historic capital, and launching a counterattack on ISIS. Erbil tried to barter access to oil in return for international sponsorship of its secession bid.[54] KRG leaders tried to assure the international community that an independent Kurdistan would become a pillar of stability and spoke about the possibilities of plebiscite on secession. Kurdistan Region president Mas'ud Barzani, who himself was born in the Mahabad republic, told an Arabic newspaper in 2015 that "the Sykes-Picot borders [*sic*] are originally artificial borders. … Each forced division cannot last indefinitely. The new borders are those drawn with blood …"[55] Ultimately, though, American pressure forced the KRG back into its unhappy marriage with Baghdad.

Paralleling the growth of the Kurdish de facto state in Iraq has been the emergence in Syria of Rojava ("the west," i.e., Western Kurdistan). Rojava is the work of the Democratic Union Party (PYD, from the Kurdish *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*), a Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK, from *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*), which had waged a decades-long insurgency against Turkey. Whereas the KRG in Iraq came to embrace Ankara as its own relationship with Baghdad soured, antipathy toward Turkey drove the PYD into a tacit alliance with the Asad regime. The PYD was wary of cooperating with the SNC or any Kurdish factions that seemed aligned with Ankara. The evacuation of government troops from Syria's north and northeast in July 2012 essentially gave the PYD a free hand to assume administrative functions, provisioning fuel, seed crops, and electricity.[56] The PYD gained control of a string of cantons buffering the Turkish border, including Qamishli, Kobani, and 'Afrin. Like the KRG, the PYD touted its Western credentials, embracing ideals of participatory democracy, feminism, and multiculturalism; though, at times, its actions have gone against its stated principles.[57] In the early stages of the Syrian uprising, PYD leaders disavowed secessionist intent but declared their goal to transform Syria into a multiethnic confederation.[58] PYD-affiliated forces have been the crucial ground troops in the

53. Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

54. Marina Ottaway and David Ottaway, "How the Kurds Got Their Way: Economic Cooperation and the Middle East's New Borders," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (May/June 2014), pp. 139–48; Michael M. Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (2013), pp. 445–46.

55. Interview by Ghassan Charbel, "بارزاني لـ«الحياة»: خرائط سايكس-بيكو مصطنعة والحدود الجديدة تُرسم بالدم" [Barzani to *Al-Hayat*: The Sykes-Picot maps are artificial, and the new borders are drawn in blood." *Al-Hayat* (London), February 7, 2015, www.alhayat.com/Articles/7243606

56. Gunter, "Kurdish Spring," pp. 450–52; Erika Solomon, "Amid Syria's Violence, Kurds Carve out Autonomy," Reuters, January 22, 2014, https://reut.rs/2rxx04z.

57. Evangelos Aretaios, "The Rojava Revolution," *OpenDemocracy* (UK), March 14, 2015, www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/evangelos-aretaios/rojava-revolution.

58. Interview with PYD chair Salih Muslim Muhammad, "'Turkey's Henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan'," KurdWatch (October 21, 2011), www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview6.html; Salih Muslim, interview by Mohammad Ballout, "ماذا فعل الرفيق السوري لأوجلان في اسطنبول؟" ["What did Öcalan's Syrian comrade do in Istanbul?"] *Assafir* (Beirut), July 29, 2013, p. 1.

campaign against ISIS in Syria, particularly in the effort to capture its de facto capital, Raqqa. However, some observers have viewed the PYD campaign as a form of ethnic cleansing aimed at ousting Sunni Arabs and imposing Kurdish rule on the population.[59] Even if these claims are exaggerated, the PYD's on-the-ground successes alone will not determine the ultimate outcome of its state-building initiative. Despite its strong military position and relatively state-like internal governance, the PYD's fate ultimately will depend on external actors, particularly the US, Russia, and Turkey.

Last, but certainly not least, ISIS is perhaps the most intriguing and infamous of the new claimants to territorial control. The group splintered from al-Qa'ida in April 2013, launching a true systemic challenge to the state system by extolling Muslims worldwide to revolt against their governments. Although it was largely personal and political disagreements that drove ISIS's predominantly Iraqi Sunni Arab leadership to break away from al-Qa'ida, it emerged as a transnational movement, recruiting fighters from all over the world (such as the fighter mentioned at the onset of this article). In June 29, ISIS shortened its name to simply the Islamic State (*al-Dawla al-Islamiyya*), rejecting all borders as colonially demarcated. The subsequent declaration of a new caliphate denied any boundedness of territoriality based either on geographic space or ethnonationalist affiliation.[60] Since the *umma*, the Islamic community of believers, is global, so too is the ostensible reach of ISIS.

In contrast to its radical rhetoric, though, ISIS's practices of territorial governance have been fairly conventional. In its early days, ISIS ruled over an archipelago, incorporating isolated population centers and sinuous desert trading routes through the Iraqi-Syrian border.[61] Within these ecological constraints, ISIS came to resemble a traditional hydraulic state, wielding control over the dams and canals of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to allocate water and electricity.[62] Governance by ISIS has betrayed a similar conventionality. Jurists, duly authorized as state authorities, mete out rulings; police apprehend and punish criminals; and tax inspectors scour for contraband.[63] ISIS, in Charles Lister's words, attempts "to provide the same services that a nation-state offers its citizens, but, according to the group, in a more ethical manner."[64] This has included outlays for education, pensions, health-care services, and minting currency. Even the apparent criminal activities of ISIS — the smuggling of archeological artifacts, oil, and people, as well as kidnapping, prostitution, and sexual slavery — appear

59. "Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria," Human Rights Watch (June 19, 2014), www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria.

60. Yosef Jabareen, "The Emerging Islamic State: Terror, Territoriality, and the Agenda of Social Transformation" *Geoforum*, Vol. 58 (Jan. 2015), p. 53.

61. Peter Harling and Alex Simon, "Erosion and Resilience of the Iraqi-Syrian Border," Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Research Paper No. RSCAS 2015/61 (September 19, 2015), p. 5.

62. Colin Schultz, "ISIS Is Cutting Off Water to Uncooperative Villages," Smithsonian.com (October 7, 2014), www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/isis-cutting-water-uncooperative-villages-180952959/; Fred Pearce, "Middle East Water Wars: In Iraq, A Battle for Control of Water," *Yale Environment 360*, August 25, 2014, https://e360.yale.edu/features/mideast_water_wars_in_iraq_a_battle_for_control_of_water.

63. Andrew F. March and Mara Revkin, "The Caliphate of Law: ISIS' Ground Rules," *Foreign Affairs*, April 15, 2015, https://fam.ag/1Q2GBYr.

64. Charles R. Lister, *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2015), pp. 48–49.

less exceptional when compared to the activities of the neighboring states.[65] Given the breakdown of services and fulmination of violence that accompanied the collapse of the Iraqi state after 2003 and of the Syrian state after 2011, many civilians were disposed to accept ISIS's cruelty in return for its protection.

Like the Soviet Union and other revolutionary states before it, the ISIS caliphate identifies as both a territorial state and the hub of a global movement.[66] ISIS has inspired acolytes from across both the Muslim world and Western countries. But, like the Bolsheviks, ISIS's leadership has proven suspicious of even close ideological kin, such as al-Qa'ida. Increasingly spectacular acts of violence were employed as ISIS attempted to outbid others in order to claim the mantle of jihad. Despite its disdain for the international community, ISIS remained extroverted in its efforts to appeal to the Muslim masses. The more recognition it receives from Muslims worldwide, the more legitimate its claims to embody a true caliphate. As ISIS's territorial core was buffeted by assault from Iraqi, Syrian, and Kurdish forces, its global campaign became all the more important.

Overall, the de facto states that have emerged in the Middle East and North Africa in the last five years have attempted to mimic the facets of statehood they identify as particularly compelling and effective. They exhibit different attitudes toward territory and sovereignty and offer varying models of prospective statehood. It remains to be seen, however, whether these simulacra might someday become real.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DE-TERRITORIALIZATION

The crisis of sovereignty in the Middle East and North Africa has produced a new set of spatial relationships between de jure and de facto states characterized, paradoxically, by both exclusion and porousness. Viewed cartographically, the de facto states appear from above as metaphorical black spots — zones of lawlessness and anarchy — in contrast to the order and civility offered by de jure states. International investment and aid alight on what James Ferguson called "usable" space: strategic military outposts, ports, oil facilities, telecommunications hubs, etc. Unusable areas and ungovernable peoples, on the other hand, are written off by the state and international community alike.[67] Increasingly fortified capitals (and Erbil, a quasi-capital[68]) experienced real estate bubbles and construction booms while peripheral zones (i.e., the Sinai Peninsula, Upper Egypt, the Sahil, the Jazira plain, and the Syrian Desert) slipped from states' grip. In Egypt, President 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's government announced a scheme in 2015 to build an entirely new capital city, funded by Gulf investors, in the

65. Ariel I. Ahram, "Sexual Violence and the Making of ISIS," *Survival*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (2015), pp. 57–78.

66. Harris Mylonas and Ariel I. Ahram, "De Facto States Unbound," PONARS Eurasia, Policy Memo No. 374 (Aug. 2015), www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm374_Mylonas-Ahram_August2015_0.pdf.

67. James Ferguson, "Seeing like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 107, No. 3 (Sept. 2005), pp. 377–82. See also Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 139–72; William Reno, "War, Markets, and the Reconfiguration of West Africa's Weak States," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (July 1997), pp. 493–510.

68. Geetika Rudra, "Malibu Meets Iraq in Erbil McMansions," ABC News (US), November 4, 2014, https://abcn.ws/1zuwtlq.

desert east of Cairo. Tellingly, the plan was unveiled at a heavily guarded Sinai beach resort. Meanwhile, the peninsula's interior became a redoubt for smugglers, criminals, and terrorists and a virtual no-go zone for state authorities.[69]

Spaces associated with the production, export, and monetization of oil and gas rents have naturally become key sites of contention. The Cyrenaican federalists claim that they are unfairly denied the benefits of Libyan oil, of which some two-thirds originates from fields in Cyrenaica. In the summer of 2013, federalist militias that controlled the export depots in the oil crescent around Sidre demanded that the government allocate a larger share of oil wealth to the east. The central government proved incapable of retaking the facilities or negotiating an end to the standoff, which cost the state an estimated $30 billion in lost oil revenue. The federalists, though, struggled to find a foreign buyer for their contraband oil. Finally, in March 2014, the US Navy did what the Libyan state could not: intercepted an Emirati tanker (flying a North Korean flag) as it carried crude oil from the rebel-controlled port.[70] The UN Security Council unanimously banned the sale of Libyan oil outside of government channels and authorized seizures of illicit natural resources.[71] Even after the crisis, the federalists sought to relocate the central bank and national oil company to the east in order to gain complete control of international rents. The US tried to block these moves by creating a peculiar situation in which the central bank in Tripoli continued to pay salaries and fund subsidies across the divided country.[72] Still, with oil as the fiscal lifeblood of the state, federalist militias, Haftar's forces, jihadist cells, and the armies of the Tripoli government continued to vie for control over the coastal oil crescent, the inland fields, and the fiscal infrastructure to back it.

Yemen presents a similar story of attempts at exclusion around the oil industry. Nearly all of Yemen's oil and gas production, most of it located in the south, stopped as a result of the 2014 escalation of the ongoing conflicts there. In 2015 and 2016, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) took control of the port cities of Mukalla and Shihr, two important export hubs. They quickly began to sell petroleum on the domestic market, including government-held zones, and even sought to extort the state oil and cellular phone companies.[73] The government of President 'Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, backed by elements of the Southern Resistance, tried to muster its forces and gain control over some of the fields in the south. It began to solicit foreign investment in order to regain financial stability. The status of the central bank, however, remained a crucial sticking point. The

69. Ishaan Tharoor, "Egypt's Strange $45 Billion Plan to Abandon Cairo as Its Capital City," *The Washington Post*, March 16, 2015, https://wapo.st/1ARGhl6; Mohamed Hassan Shaban, "Egypt Declares 'New' State of Emergency in North Sinai," *Asharq al-Awsat*, April 26, 2015, www.aawsat.net/2015/04/article55343110/egypt-declares-new-state-of-emergency-in-north-sinai.

70. David D. Kirkpatrick, "SEAL Team Raids a Tanker and Thwarts a Militia's Bid to Sell Libyan Oil," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2014, https://nyti.ms/2t531Gz.

71. Khalid Mahmoud, "طرابلس تطالب رسميا المجتمع الدولي بمساعدتها في تأمين أمن البلاد" ["Tripoli officially requests international community assistance to ensure the country's security"] *Asharq al-Awsat*, March 22, 2014, https://aawsat.com/home/article/61051; Khalid Mahmoud, "مجلس الأمن يفرض عقوبات على مهربي النفط الليبي" ["Security Council imposes sanctions on Libyan oil smugglers"], *Asharq al-Awsat*, March 21, 2014, https://aawsat.com/home/article/60186.

72. "The Prize: Fighting for Libya's Energy Wealth," International Crisis Group, Middle East and North Africa Report No. 163 (December 3, 2015), p. 23.

73. Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning, and Mohammed Ghobari, "How Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen Has Made al Qaeda Stronger — and Richer," Reuters, April 8, 2016, https://reut.rs/1YiuWYA.

Hadi government sought to create an alternative central bank that would operate under its control and prevent foreign rents from reaching Huthi-controlled areas in the north. The US objected to such arrangements, viewing them as auguring a further fractured country.[74]

Reduced to rump states, Iraq and Syria ceded considerable territory to ISIS and other rivals. Yet the loss of territorial control yielded some significant political and economic advantages. The inflow of refugees and relocation of businesses to government-controlled territories precipitated runs in the real estate market, a boon for regime-aligned profiteers.[75] Iraq's southern oil fields, which hold 90% of the country's reserves, attracted billions in foreign investment. Even as insurgents encroached toward the perimeter of Baghdad International Airport, international carriers added routes connecting Iraq to hubs of the global oil economy in Europe, Asia, and the Gulf.[76] Iraq's two largest cellphone carriers, Kuwait-based Zain and Kurdistan Region–based Asiacell, launched belated upgrades to a third-generation (3G) wireless network in 2015, while ISIS systematically knocked down cellular relay towers, cutting off parts of the Nineveh, Salah al-Din, and Anbar Governorates from the national grid.[77]

Syria was on weaker footing than Iraq, with smaller oil reserves (most of which had fallen to rebel hands), massive refugee outflows, and shortages of foreign reserves. Still, the Asad regime's policy of reconstruction before reconciliation turned zones of government control along the Mediterranean coast and surrounding Damascus into magnets for investment, production, and profiteering.[78] With Russian backing, offshore drilling rigs were planned, quite literally beyond the reach of rebels or Western sanctions.[79] In 2014, South African cell phone giant MTN doubled down on its investment in Syria, expanding to a 20-year full operating agreement.[80] The Asad regime wielded its sovereign standing in the international community as a weapon in the fight against the rebels. With

74. Katherine Bauer and Eric Pelofsky, "Yemen's Banking Problems Could Have Dire Humanitarian Implications," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch No. 2776 (March 24, 2017).

75. Rita al-Ahmadi, "Syria's Housing Crisis Widens Social Gap," trans. Taylor Huffman, March 8, 2015, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/business/2015/03/syria-housing-rent-social-gap.html; Zaid Sabah, Jack Fairweather, and Aziz Alwan, "Baghdad Mansions Sell for $1 Million with Islamic State at Gates," *Bloomberg*, November 4, 2014, https://bloom.bg/2suoMiz; Molly Hennessy-Fiske and Nabih Bulos, "Baghdad's New Mall Is a Haven, and a Symbol of an Improving Economy," *The Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 2014, https://lat.ms/2sC5SFX.

76. Kareem Fahim, "Airlines Suspend Flights to Iraq's Baghdad Airport after Jet Is Hit by Gunfire," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2015, https://nyti.ms/2sqasXp; "Date Set for Launch of Baghdad–Baku Flights," *AzerNews*, September 11, 2015 www.azernews.az/business/87759.html.

77. Matt Smith, "Network Shutdowns Hurt Iraq Telcos but 3G Offers Some Solace," Reuters, March 26, 2015, https://reut.rs/2scmbH3; "داعش يقطع الاتصالات عن الموصل منعا لتسريب المعلومات عنه" ["ISIS cuts connections to Mosul to prevent leaks"], *Alghad Press* (Baghdad), November 28, 2014, www.alghadpress.com/news/23707/داعش-يقطع-الاتصالات-عن-الموصل-معنا-لتسريب-المعلوما.

78. Laura James, "Foreign Aid Will Keep War Economy Afloat," Oxford Analytica Daily Brief (July 15, 2013), https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB184452/Foreign-aid-will-keep-Syrias-war-economy-afloat; Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU), "Syria Economy: Regime Talks Up Reconstruction," *EIU ViewsWire*, July 24, 2014.

79. James Stafford, "Syria Signs First-Ever Offshore Oil Deal, with Russia," OilPrice.com, December 26, 2013, https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/Syria-Signs-First-Ever-Offshore-Oil-Deal-with-Russia.html

80. Andrew England, "MTN Presses Ahead with Plans for 20-Year License in Syria," *Financial Times*, August 7, 2014, https://on.ft.com/2rxLNMD.

backing from Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hizbullah forces, the regime selectively cut off displaced and besieged areas from international relief agencies. Such blockades did more than simply starve the population into submission, they helped drive the displaced — and what was left of their accumulated capital — into the state's hands.[81]

Yet viewed from the bottom up, the boundaries between the state and non-state zones appear flexible and fuzzy, more frontier than border.[82] North Africa has a long history of illicit trade connecting government-controlled areas (known as *bilad al-makhzan*, "the land of the state treasury") and the periphery (*bilad al-siba*, "the land of anarchy"). In recent decades, sometimes-violent entrepreneurs have made millions trading in petroleum, cigarettes, foodstuffs, and people. Some of this trade is bound for local illicit markets, but much of it is destined for European consumption. Since 2011, criminal enterprises intermingled with Sahrawi and Touareg secessionist movements and Islamist rebellions sprawling across the Sahil and sub-Saharan western Africa. Regime collapse in Libya effectively unfettered the Touareg, emboldened al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM) and its fellow travelers, and deepened the criminalization of the rebellions.[83] Hostage-taking was added to the repertoire. State authorities clung to coastal cities along the Mediterranean and hunkered down around the far-flung oil fields, mineral deposits, pipelines, and petro-chemical facilities of the interior. At the same time, though, military and government officials in Mauritania, Algeria, Guinea-Bissau, and elsewhere provided protection and access to sea and airports for transshipment. In some cases, they even granted diplomatic immunity to these criminals-cum-rebels.[84]

A similar pattern emerged in Syria and Iraq, where the seams between state and rebel spaces became zones of arbitrage and exchange. In the first years of the civil war, Damascus fought hard to beat back rebel groups like the Free Syrian Army and the al-Qa'ida–affiliated Nusra Front,[85] but the territories of Rojava and ISIS remained largely unscathed by government attacks. Reciprocally, both the PYDand ISIS exerted most of their energy combating rebels, not Syrian state forces. In 2013 and 2014, ISIS kept

81. Adam G. Lichtenheld, "Beyond Ethno-Sectarian 'Cleansing': The Assortative Logic of Forced Displacement in Syria," in "Refugees and Migration Movements in the Middle East," POMEPS Studies No. 25 (Mar. 2017), pp. 42–48; Guillaume Charon, "Syria: Forsaken IDPs Adrift Inside a Fragmenting State," Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (October 21, 2014), www.internal-displacement.org/assets/library/Middle-East/Syria/pdf/201410-me-syria-overview-en.pdf.

82. Kevin Woods "Ceasefire Capitalism: Military-Private Partnerships, Resource Concessions and Military-State Building in the Burma–China Borderlands," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2011), pp. 747–70.

83. Yvan Guichaoua, "Tuareg Militancy and the Sahelian Shockwaves of the Libyan Revolution" in *Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, eds. Cole and McQuinn, pp. 321–36; Francesca Mannocchi, "Libya's Smuggling Sector Overshadows Broken Economy," TRT World, April 12, 2017, www.trtworld.com/magazine/libyas-smuggling-sector-overshadows-broken-economy-334932.

84. Wolfram Lacher, "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region," CEIP, Carnegie Papers No. 159 (Sept. 2012), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf; Ricardo René Larémont, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Sahel," *African Security*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2011), pp. 242–68; Jessica M. Huckabey, "Al Qaeda in Mali: The Defection Connections," *Orbis*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Summer 2013), pp. 467–84.

85. Short for *Jabhat al-nusra li-ahl al-Sham*, meaning the Support (*nusra*) Front for the People of al-Sham (Greater Syria), the Syrian al-Qa'ida affiliate rebranded itself in 2016 as the Fatah al-Sham Front before merging with other groups to form the al-Sham Liberation Organization (*Hay'at tahrir al-Sham*).

the Tabqa Dam in eastern Syria operational, even selling electricity back to the national grid.[86] Years before the 2014 offensive, ISIS had extorted western Iraq by holding hostage a portion of the salaries of police, judges, and civil servants in Mosul and other western Iraqi cities. As in Libya and Yemen, the Iraqi central bank continued to pay salaries even in areas definitively under ISIS control.[87]

The Iraq-Syria border remained an object of fixation for rebels, even as it appeared to dissolve.[88] Consumer goods, drugs, illicit oil, arms, and people pass across the common borders of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.[89] The monies and weaponry intended to keep Damascus and Baghdad afloat became spoils in the hands of antistate actors, an illicit parallel to the stream of investment within state-held zones. Mastery over the border is seen as conferring legitimacy upon those who intend to rectify the failures of previous eras of mapmaking. Paradoxically, the old, colonially inscribed borders had an almost magnetic attraction — even to those desperate to erase them.

CONCLUSION

The practices of sovereignty in international society have always contained elements of hypocrisy, if not self-delusion.[90] In the Middle East and North Africa, like many other developing regions, it was in the interest of both regional incumbents and outside powers to maintain the myth of states as possessing a monopoly of the use of force over discrete and bounded territories. Regional and international institutions helped paper over the apparent mismatch between de jure and de facto power.

Since the sudden breakdown of Middle Eastern states in 2011, though, new statehood aspirants have seized power on the ground and demanded a fundamental revision of the regional system. Viewing sovereignty as a specifically spatial arrangement helps elucidate the patterns of conflict and cooperation. Different kinds of de facto states claim territorial control based on distinctive historical justifications and ideological visions. As they try to cultivate support on the ground, they also vie for international sponsorship. Vertical challengers, particularly governments-in-waiting like the Syrian National Council and Libya's National Transitional Council, disputed rulers and regimes as illegitimate but tried to preserve their states' territorial integrity. Yet the act of seeking outside alliances often inadvertently resulted in territo-

86. Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "The Assad Regime and Jihadis: Collaborators and Allies?", *SyriaComment*, February 11, 2014, www.joshualandis.com/blog/assad-regime-jihadis-collaborators-allies/.

87. Peter Taylor, "'It's God's Gift.' Islamic State Fills Coffers with Iraqi Government Cash," *The Guardian*, April 21, 2015, www.gu.com/world/2015/apr/22/isis-fills-coffers-with-iraqi-government-cash.

88. Harling and Simon, "Erosion and Resilience," p. 9.

89. Sam Jones, "New EU Syria Sanctions Reveal Regime Collusion with Isis," *Financial Times*, March 7, 2015, https://on.ft.com/2sqwWYe; Ahmed Rasheed, "Oil Smuggling Finances Islamic State's New Caliphate," Reuters, July 23, 2014, https://reut.rs/2rtgaZu; Ewen MacCaskill and Martin Chulov, "Isis Apparently Takes Control of US Weapons Airdrop Intended for Kurds," *The Guardian*, October 22, 2014, www.gu.com/world/2014/oct/22/isis-us-airdrop-weapons-pentagon; C. J. Chivers, "Where the Islamic State Gets Its Weapons," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 27, 2015, https://nyti.ms/2sBAWWu; Mona Mahmood and Ian Black, "Free Syrian Army Rebels Defect to Islamist Group Jabhat al-Nusra," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2013, www.gu.com/world/2013/may/08/free-syrian-army-rebels-defect-islamist-group

90. Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

rial splintering and the fragmentation of sovereignty itself. Separatist movements like those in Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan Region, Azawad, South Yemen, Rojava, and Cyrenaica have sought to refashion territorial arrangements that they deem fundamentally illegitimate and ill-conceived. Even in reimagining these boundaries, though, such horizontal challengers affirmed their commitments to broader principles of territoriality in the international system. They strove, in effect, to be "good neighbors" in international society. True revolutionary actors like the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham posed the severest systemic challenge. Yet the idiosyncratic theory of Islamic statehood betrays a marked familiarity with the ways in which practices of power become territorially inscribed. Moreover, these systemic challengers evoke the strongest resistance from existing states.

Responding to separatist challengers, weak de jure states like Iraq, Syria, Yemen, or Libya rely increasingly on leveraging their international standing to gain resources for their own defense. They invite outside intervention by international sponsors to help beat back the onslaught of rebellion. Russian intervention in Syria, the Saudi campaign in Yemen, Egyptian aid to Khalifa Haftar and the federalists, and American airpower operating across the region all emphasize the degree to which the "real" states still fail to exert power effectively. Moreover, the efforts to preserve states can unintentionally hollow out territorial control. Rather than consolidate exclusive authority across the entirety of their designated national territory, beleaguered states focus on narrow enclaves of accumulation and extraction. The struggle for hegemony over usable space effectively knits together financial and cultural networks spanning state and non-state space. In the midst of civil war, interests, ideology, and opportunity compel belligerents to engage in alliances, collusion, and tacit collaboration that belie the simplistic dichotomy of government versus opposition, state versus rebel.[91] Even as they oppose each other, de jure and de facto power can become inextricably intertwined.

The emergence of vertical, horizontal, and systemic challengers could spell a fundamental change in the nature of statehood in the Middle East and North Africa. New territorial arrangements that entail a denaturing or dilution of sovereignty are possible. Instead of territorial exclusion and the monopolization of power, new modes of accommodation could allow for gradations of territorial control and permit de facto state powers to be nested within the territory of de jure states. These types of informal power-sharing arrangements have yielded a modicum of peace to troubled territories and have helped to "freeze" conflicts between de facto and de jure states in places like Northern Cyprus, Somaliland, and Nagorno-Karabakh.[92] Few of the contenders for or incumbents of political power in the Middle East and North Africa would readily embrace such schema. Yet the task of fixing weak states, much less replacing defunct ones, is herculean. As the bloodletting continues, such solutions could represent the best hope of salvaging a livable political order.

91. Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

92. Eiki Berg, "Examining Power-Sharing in Persistent Conflicts: *De Facto* Pseudo-Statehood versus *de Jure* Quasi-Federalism," *Global Society*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2007), pp. 199–217; Dov Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2004), pp. 8, 112–13.