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ELUSIVE STATE-BUILDING
The Middle East and North Africa 1917–2017

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Background Note

The past century has been a particularly important one in the long history of the Middle East and North Africa. From the Maghreb to the Mashreq, history seemed to 'accelerate' during this period. It appeared to do so both in bringing long-festering social and political tensions to a cusp and birthing new ones, doing ever so indecisively and without a sense of closure. By the time the twentieth century closed and the twenty-first one opened, analysis and study of the Orient remained generally dominated by talk of unceasing conflict, open-ended crises and continuous transformation.

Though it had never really lost it, the region had regained international (policy and media) attention in the wake of the 1990–1991 Gulf War, which coincided with the end of the Cold War. That crisis, which played out continuously throughout the 1990s with the United Nations-enforced economic embargo on Iraq and its costly humanitarian consequences, then gave way to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and their 'Global War on Terror' aftermath, which in turn yielded to the 2011 uprisings of the 'Arab Spring' and their own subsequent crises, notably in the Levant, the Yemen and Libya.

For all their high-profile and urgent nature, the momentous events of the 2010s line up, however, more significantly in a historical sequence of developments, which can be traced back a century ago to the 1910s and at the heart of which stand the challenge of state-building throughout the whole of the region.

Old orders and fleeting statehood

The past one hundred years can indeed be characterised as a century during which the societies of the Middle East and the North African region have been overwhelmingly preoccupied with the project of the establishment of viable and functioning states. That project was crucial for them and for the larger international environment and, in significant ways, it remains a difficult and incomplete task, as talk of 'fractured lands'[1] continues to dominate the contemporary regional scene.

Where state apparatuses had been set up with a measure of stability, that apparent durability[2] was achieved through the artifice of authoritarianism, which invariably – notably in Iraq and Syria, the twin Ba'athist *mukhabarat* states – sowed the seeds of its own demise.[3] For decades, systems divorced from their citizens' aspirations for representation seemed impervious to the internal and external pressures for change. In time, that alienating dynamic only made the fall of these giants with clay feet more spectacular, as witnessed vividly in the case of Egypt and Libya in 2011. Elsewhere, traditional tribal systems, whether initially organised in the form of emirates, former Ottoman provinces or large confederations, evolved quite late into state systems more so in form than in substance and often dragging a

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1 See the extended *New York Times* August 2016 series for the period 2003–2016: Scott Anderson, 'Fractured Lands: How the Arab World Came Apart', *The New York Times*, August 2016.

2 Eva Bellin, among others, covered this aspect in her article 'The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective' in *Comparative Politics*, 36, 2, January 2004, p. 139–158.

3 See, notably, Eberhard Kienle's study, *Ba'th vs. Ba'th: The Conflict Between Iraq and Syria, 1968–1989*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1990; and Olivier Schlumberger, ed., *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007.

'tribes with flags' legacy, as Tahseen Bashir once captured it. Equally, the Palestinian question itself, for all its identity and political aspects, was and remains a state-formation dispute and quest.[4]

The elusive Oriental search for state-building started at the confluence of three related but distinct developments:
→ the end of the Ottoman Empire,
→ the colonial encounter and
→ the rise of nationalistic and religious emancipation movements.

Eminently interrelated in their eventual consequences, each of these three aspects of Middle Eastern and North African history initially played out distinctly. The slow *end of the Ottoman Empire* is the first and arguably most important of these stories as relates to the nascent elusive order. In retrospect, we can see that diminishing control of the Sublime Porte since about the mid-1860s both paradoxically enabled the rise of local, autonomous movements for emancipation and rendered their project more arduous as it kept attempting a revival through pan-Islamism. Though it was ultimately unsuccessful – and indeed fuelled further the secular opposition of the Young Turks/Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) – the combined historical territorial reach of the Ottoman provinces (from the Levant to Algeria) and the nature of the transcendent religiously-couched project, as well indeed as its 'reformist' claims, introduced a pattern whereby 'backward-looking forward-moving change' could be articulated as a political project to be pursued both by state and non-state actors alike. In time, it is precisely where Istanbul laid down the sword of the Caliphate in 1924 that the organisation of the Islamic State (IS) sought, in 2014, to reclaim it and re-establish that religious-territorial (by now also virtual) dominion.[5]

The Ottoman Empire's imprint – which is also present in the dynastic power matrix and heavy administrative structure that it left in the countries of the region; witness the subsequent Egyptian, Syrian, Tunisian and Algerian systems – was accompanied by the equally impactful *colonial experience* at the hands of European powers. Captured (at times in a reductionist way) in the post-Arab Spring discussion on 'the end of Sykes-Picot', the Mandate System configuration came to introduce in the key late 1910s–early 1920s period a second factor of 'structural historical' disruption of the state-building project, namely external control and interventionism. To be certain, the events played out differently throughout the region but the logic was the same.

In the Levant, the division of newly-carved territories between Britain and France led to unrest starting in the 1920s and running well into the 1940s. It 'stunned' and paralysed the domestic political power struggles – now focused on the external arbiter – and cemented the role and place of violence as the key commodity to settle those struggles. Nowhere more than in Iraq (amalgamated from the Mosul, Baghdad and Basra provinces of the Ottoman Empire, and given a Hashemite king harking from the Hejaz) were those dystrophies more visible. They built up continuously, ever more violently, during the monarchy years until 1958, the Ba'thi regime from 1968 onwards and in the post-2003 US-controlled era. In the Maghreb, the Italian control of Libya and the French one of Tunisia (protectorate), Algeria (department) and Morocco (protectorate) yielded the same type of colonial dispossession experience formally ending in the 1960s but taking new postcolonial forms.

Finally, the past century was also importantly the scene of a crucial competition between societal projects throughout the region pursuing *visions of nation and state* anchored, differently, in nationalism or religion. Even if they tried by the mid-twentieth century to maximise their positions (individually as new states or jointly in regional organisations, notably the League of Arab States), the countries of the region were essentially, in majority, political systems set up by others to the latter's benefits. Dominated by a sense of peripherality and indeed superficiality, such exogenous encounters with modernity largely hold the keys to the 'volatility', 'instability' and 'violence' that became the familiar depictions of the region (and hallmarks of Orientalism) but they also constituted the stage for the nationalist/military and the Islamist/insurgency forces that are still competing indecisively in most of these theatres.

As socio-historical entities, these two camps (there are naturally many sub-fractions on either side) are none too different in their quest for forms of rule that instrumentalise the state and in their populist appeals through ideologies of mass mobilisation (identity vs. faith). However, as the untenable nature of the post-World War I arrangements (Hussein-Mac-Mahon correspondence, Sykes-Picot treaty, Balfour declaration, Mandate System) revealed itself, pursuit of the decolonised state became engaged into by way of increasingly clashing projects.

On the background of their recent different intellectual trajectories during the nineteenth century,[6] nationalists and Islamists offered then their societies and opposed to

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4 On that aspect, and looking at the Palestinian side, Rashid Khalidi speaks of 'two failures of state-building – one in the past and the other ongoing' (p. ix); see his 'Writing Middle Eastern History in a Time of Historical Amnesia', in *The Iron Cage: The Story of Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2007.

5 See the recent works of Reza Pankhurst (*The Inevitable Caliphate*, 2013) and Salman Sayyid (*Recalling the Caliphate*, 2014) on this issue.

6 Transnationalism was present even then with European influences (Johann Fichte and Giuseppe Mazzini impacted the thinking of the likes of Rifaa al Tahtawi, Abderrahman al Kawakibi and Sati al Husri) flavouring the Arab nationalism debate and Asian ones the Islamist discussion in the region (Jamal al Din al Afghani's views on a modern Islamic state fed into the philosophies of Muhammad Abdu, Rashid Ridha and Hassan al Banna).

each other two competing transocial conceptions about the nature of the state and political legitimacy. Whereas Arab nationalism was paradoxically a reaction to Western colonialism *and* a result of Westernising reform – and therefore carried an element of statehood anchored in a feeling of cultural commonality (imagined or real) – Islamism in all its four configurations so far – early mobilisation (e.g., Hassan al Banna 1920s), post-independence oppositions (from Sayyid Qutb in Egypt in the 1960s to Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj in Algeria in the late 1980s–early 1990s), globalised transnationalism (Osama Bin Laden in the 1990s) and insurrectionary (post-Arab Spring in the 2010s) – invariably sought to reshape a legacy through rupture. Islamism's Janus-faced ambition has, in that sense, been to play out both as a liberating force and as a restorative conservative movement. With a violence-advocating armed group movement overtaking that project in the 2010s to set up an 'Islamic State' – and doing so with an effective transnational influence on other militant groups as well as on isolated individuals – it remains to be seen in particular what lasting influence will the ISIS saga have on non-violent Islamist militancy in the countries of the region, and particularly so as the political transitions continue into the second half of the 2010s.

If then, in the final analysis, the in-built fragility of the Middle Eastern and North African state was initially primarily the result of a disintegrative project from without (colonialism), the social experience of authoritarianism that dominated from the 1960s onwards further stripped the statehood project of its representation component by regularly and unabashedly exercising power on the mode of arbitrariness in lieu of accountability – whereas Ibn Khaldoun had posited that the larger the societal *iltiham* (coalescence), the stronger the state. Today, a century after the modern-day state-building project was launched in the region – albeit in a colonial or proto-colonial context – the stories meet again while the actors have matured and morphed into entities with external connections of their own making. Amidst new-old dynamics of neo-authoritarianism and coercive democratisation,[7] the active pursuit of state-building by non-state actors is but one of the many perplexing features of the contemporary regional scene.

7   As discussed, for instance, in Juan Cole's chapter in Shahram Akbarzadeh, James Piscatori, Benjamin MacQueen and Amin Saikal, eds., *American Democracy Promotion in the Changing Middle East: From Bush to Obama*, London: Routledge, 2013.