The Decline and Fall of the Arab State

Ariel I. Ahram and Ellen Lust

In May 2015, the last border outpost between Syria and Iraq still controlled by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad fell to the mujahideen of the Islamic State. The Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, has long intended to erase what it claims are artificial boundaries, and to topple the ill-conceived states that mar the Arab world. It is not alone in that aim. From the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria and Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, to the secessionist al-Hirak in southern Yemen and the Cyrenaican separatists in Libya, political actors across the region are mounting claims to states of their own. For the second time in a century, the map of the Arab world is on the brink of radical revision.

To some, this crisis comes as little surprise. For Arab nationalists, pan-Islamist activists and Washington DC insiders alike, reimagining the regional map is something of a pastime. They have long assumed that the Arab state system was tenuous. They recount how imperial conspiracies, invasions and occupations erected borders and imposed systems of rule badly out of touch with the identities and aspirations of the region’s people. While Arab states enjoyed the privileges of recognition abroad, they faced a perilous dearth of legitimacy at home. In the end, popular resentments would surely sweep aside such political artifice.

Yet, even if we accept the premise that sovereignty was a sham, that Arab states were doomed from birth, and that the current crisis was therefore...
inevitable, there are still important questions left unanswered. The first set of questions pertains to timing: why were the long-standing vulnerabilities of the Arab states exposed now, and how had these defective states been able to survive for so long? The second set concerns the aspiring successor states. Why have the challengers to sovereignty taken the particular form that they have? Do any of them offer a chance for a more stable and peaceful political order?

The Arab struggle has taken place in a wider global context in which notions of statehood and sovereignty have changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War. Domestic battles may have triggered the sudden collapse of Arab states, but changes at the regional and international levels created permissive conditions for political-opposition movements to destabilise existing states, manoeuvre toward statehood and potentially challenge the state system. Structural change at the global level made dramatic realignment at the state and regional levels possible. Instability and uncertainty in the institutional rules of sovereignty affected the ways in which Arab states could respond to internal challengers, simultaneously hamstringing existing Arab states and emboldening their opposition.

The state and its competitors in the Arab world

Sovereignty, as the American political scientist Stephen Krasner famously put it, has always been a form of organised hypocrisy. In part, this is because sovereignty is inextricable from international hierarchy. Sovereign states are presumed equal, but some are more equal than others. Acting self-interestedly and amorally, states exert power over others and often violate norms of sovereignty in pursuit of higher principles. But hypocrisy stems also from the sheer girth of the concept itself. Sovereignty has multiple definitions, and many dimensions that are often incompatible. At the international level, sovereignty entails recognition and admission to the community of states. Once admitted, sovereignty provides for territorial inviolability and autonomy under international law. At the domestic level, sovereignty involves untrammeled control over specific territories and peoples. In other words, a sovereign state rules. Sovereignty is also closely tied to legitimacy. Particularly in a democratic age, sovereign states derive their legitimacy by embodying the popular will to self-rule.
In practice, the meaning of sovereignty has varied over time, and changed with the evolution of state practices.\textsuperscript{8} In 1914, the noted international jurist Robert Lansing wrote that:

> Political mastery depends upon the physical power to coerce ... The legal right to exercise the supreme will over a community fail[s] to confer upon its legal possessor a real supremacy, unless the possessor of the physical power permits such exercises.\textsuperscript{9}

Customs dating back to the Peace of Westphalia had demonstrated that law alone was an insufficient basis upon which to derive sovereignty. Lansing was appointed the United States’ secretary of state the year after he wrote about sovereignty, serving through the First World War and at the Paris peace talks of 1919. But his preference for power above law would quickly seem antiquated.

President Woodrow Wilson himself came to Paris with a radically different agenda, calling for a system of sovereignty premised on national self-determination, derived from international law, and adjudicated and enforced by international society through the League of Nations.\textsuperscript{10} Lansing would eventually resign in disgust. This post-war moment marked the beginning of a critical period of uncertainty and fluidity in which the institutions of sovereignty would undergo drastic revision. By 1945, the rules of sovereignty had changed, but so too had its judges.\textsuperscript{11} Sovereignty was conferred, not possessed as Lansing had posited. Sovereign states could therefore be formed by the initiative of the international community in collaboration with the population itself. Seemingly primitive peoples could be tutored until ready for self-governance. The sovereign states would then represent the will of the people.\textsuperscript{12} The elimination of recognised states from the system was prohibited; territorial integrity was ensured not just by a national army in defence of the state, but by the international community as a whole in defence of a system.\textsuperscript{13}

American ascent was crucial to the solidification of the mid-twentieth-century understanding of sovereignty. The United States emerged after the First World War as the only major power with its military and economy...
intact. By the end of the Second World War, the US possessed the world’s only nuclear weapons and half the world’s industrial capacity. The formation of the United Nations and the start of decolonisation after 1945 saw the rules of sovereignty become steadily more institutionalised. Britain and France sought at first to rein in the anti-imperialist impulse, but eventually had to concede to American primacy. The USSR was initially sceptical of the entire idea of international law and society, but gradually came to see an opportunity to weaken imperial powers and, at the same time, confirm its own standing in the international system. The American notion of sovereignty had symbolic and moral appeal as well. Leaders of anticolonial movements across the globe – including Egyptian nationalist Sa’d Zaghlul and the aspiring king of Syria, Faisal bin Hussein, as well as the leaders of China’s May Fourth Movement and India’s Rowlatt Satyagraha – embraced it as a route to national liberation.

Of course, the great powers continued to control and intervene in subordinate states. Many post-colonial states appeared deliberately misconstrued. Colonially inscribed borders seemed to foment ethno-sectarian infighting, hamper state-building and ensure long-term dependence on foreign powers. Still, there remained a strong commitment on practical, if not moral, grounds to preserving even dysfunctional states. Both the US and the USSR funnelled arms and aid to prop up regional proxies whose domestic sovereignty was contested. Allowing a state to splinter could set a dangerous precedent, emboldening secessionist movements worldwide and eventually threatening the entire state system. The international community would rarely countenance the birth of new successor states, nor would they declare a state dead, even if its physical power was moribund.

These new rules played a crucial role in shaping the Arab state system. European powers vied with one another and, to a lesser extent, with indigenous players over the spoils of the Ottoman domains. Across North Africa and the Middle East, states emerged as bricolages of colonial and indigenous institutions of rule. European colonial administrations encapsu-
lated pre-existing political administrations in Egypt, North Africa and the Persian Gulf in the early twentieth century. At the end of the First World War, mandatory control was established over Iraq and the Levant, effectively launching entirely new political entities.\textsuperscript{21}

Newly enshrined Arab rulers used the idea of sovereignty to manipulate their great-power sponsors and the international community as a whole. The military arsenals provided by outside patrons were often put to ulterior purposes of internal suppression or to vie for regional supremacy. Arab states tried repeatedly to gain leverage in the international system by threatening to withhold oil exports from Europe and the US, although the ‘oil weapon’ was never as effective as promised.\textsuperscript{22} Still, those Arab states that had oil resources had the ability to trade petrodollars for security guarantees from outside powers or other Arab states.

Though the Arab League gestured rhetorically toward Arab unity, it served in fact as an institutional anchor, ensuring the persistence of sovereignty for member states.\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, Arab leaders often turned the normative impulse for Arab unification into a tool to delegitimise opponents both in the domestic and the inter-state arenas.\textsuperscript{24}

Arab autocrats claimed credit for attaining, defending and augmenting national self-determination. Sovereignty (\textit{as-siyada}) became a totem, as individual rulers were indelibly imprinted in official nationalist discourse.\textsuperscript{25} Schools, media, military services and banal tokens such as postage stamps and currency became vehicles for the leaders’ cults of personality.\textsuperscript{26} Basing legitimacy on the idea of self-determination, though, worked both ways. While rulers portrayed themselves as embodying national independence, the opposition ridiculed them as puppets of neo-imperialism.

In return for political acquiescence, states also promised expansive programmes of social protection and redistribution. Ensuring national food security was a top priority. These arrangements were especially generous in oil-rich states, but were evident even in resource-poor Egypt and Jordan, and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{27} Yet these authoritarian bargains were often slipshod, with neglected rural peripheries and teeming urban slums hovering at the edge of the state’s reach. Residents ate subsidised bread while pirating electricity and squatting on state-owned lands. Such bargains became progressively
more tenuous in periods of economic liberalisation beginning in the 1970s. Acceding to the economic reforms required by the World Bank, the IMF and foreign investors made it impossible for rulers to keep up the domestic spending necessary to maintain the broad-based authoritarian bargain. In place of populism, narrower coalitions of crony capitalists ruled the day, further alienating the common citizenry.\textsuperscript{28}

Few Arab states could make the transition from brutal and despotic force to administrative and infrastructural authority. When persuasion faltered, repression was at hand. Ready access to military funding and support sometimes made rulers over-confident in their ability to suppress opposition, as with the defunct Hashemite monarchy in Iraq.\textsuperscript{29} The institutional organs of surveillance and violence, the secret police and the army, remained the mainstays of stability and governance, making Arab states fierce but weak.\textsuperscript{30} In sum, securing internal order was less a matter of negotiation than of imposition, and remained accordingly fragile.

Nearly every \textit{de jure} Arab state had at least one counter-state lurking in its shadow. These aspiring players pointed to the inconsistency between promise and practice. They claimed to correct the historical mistakes of the past and promised a more just, stable and legitimate form of statehood. Some, such as the Shi’ites under Saddam Hussein, demanded different forms of political order within existing territorial boundaries. Others, such as the Kurds, sought territorial adjustments and the establishment of entirely new structures of statehood. When states foundered, challengers seized the opportunity to establish a territorial base and exercise real authority, becoming, in effect, de facto states, as discussed below. But no matter their actual hold on power, depth of popular support or validity of historical grievance, these state aspirants were never welcomed into the international community. Historians and international-relations scholars treated them as momentary disruptions, dead ends in the region’s evolution. But they are indicative of how populations themselves imagined alternative versions of nationhood and sovereignty.\textsuperscript{31}

Taken as a group, the de facto states in the Middle East mirrored the weaknesses and deficiencies of the parent states they tried to supplant. They, too, derived their fiscal means from primary (and sometimes illicit)
commodity exports. They, too, were often on the dole, dependent on external patrons for military, financial and diplomatic support. The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad of 1946–47 and the All-Palestine Government of 1948 quickly collapsed after their international sponsors deserted them.\textsuperscript{32} The various Palestinian ‘states within a state’ that appeared in Jordan and Lebanon were eager recipients of monetary and military support from fellow Arab rejectionists and the Soviet Union. During the Lebanese Civil War, Palestinian factions (like nearly all other belligerents) used drugs and arms smuggling to finance their war-making operations.\textsuperscript{33} The Western Sahara gained a measure of recognition through the African Union, but it was shut out by the Arab League and unrecognised by most of international society. The Polisario Front’s foothold would be nearly impossible without its umbilical connection to Algeria.\textsuperscript{34}

Despite the jeremiads of commentators and politicians alike about the impending breakdown of regional order, Arab states endured and the state system as a whole prevailed for half a century. When state power faltered, as in Yemen and Oman in the 1960s, Jordan before the ‘Black September’ of 1970–71 or Lebanon in 1958 and 1975, neighbours and great powers tended to fill the voids of authority through proxy wars or direct military involvement. State death or even territorial reappropriation remained anathema. Lebanon retained its seat at the United Nations despite 30 years of obvious failure and civil war, and Syria’s hegemony over its neighbour was accepted in practice but never formalised by international law. Israel’s control over the occupied territories has been widely judged inadmissible. Most emphatically of all, Iraq’s invasion and annexation of Kuwait in 1990 was rebuffed by a coalition of Western and Arab states.\textsuperscript{35} The political map of the Arab world might have been a fiction, but it was a useful fiction.

**Global dissensus and regional ramifications**

If the Gulf War represented a high-water mark in the international community’s effort to preserve the territorial integrity of states, there was an undercurrent forming. Overshadowed by the Iraq–Kuwait crisis was another momentous event in the history of the Arab-state regional system: the unification of the Yemens in May 1990. The Republic of Yemen’s shotgun
marriage to the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) marked the first internationally accepted adjustment to the Arab map since the Syrian–Egyptian unity scheme of 1958.\(^{36}\)

The changes in Yemen were a small part of a contentious and much larger transformation in the rules of sovereignty. The causes of these changes were both ideological and material. With the USSR collapsing, Soviet clients like the PDRY had no choice but to beggar their neighbours. Old states dissolved. Sovereignty was bestowed virtually overnight to successor states, beginning with the former Soviet republics and extending to secessionist states in the former Yugoslavia and, most recently, East Timor and South Sudan.\(^{37}\)

Sovereignty itself seemed, in certain circles, obsolete. The transition towards a European Union represented an ambitious programme to pool — or perhaps surrender — sovereign powers.\(^{38}\) It was some of these same states, not by coincidence, that championed the argument that the international community had a ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P) civilians and might abrogate sovereignty to prevent humanitarian disasters.\(^{39}\) Yet many actions ostensibly undertaken under the R2P mantle ultimately became measures meant to help build up effective state power, essentially saving sovereignty from itself.\(^{40}\) The effort to fix frail and failing states proved financially and militarily exorbitant, sapping the will to intervene.\(^{41}\)

As a consequence, the new rules of sovereignty remained inchoate. Who was entitled to statehood? And what did international recognition entail in terms of rights, entitlements and obligations? The implosion of the Soviet Union represented what the American political scientist Philip Roeder calls a ‘nation-state crisis’, in which the chances for change in the configuration of states increased dramatically.\(^{42}\) But the crisis was not limited to the post-Soviet sphere.\(^{43}\) Returning to the Wilsonian spirit of 1919, national self-determination re-emerged as a criterion upon which sovereignty rested. The international community backed the conferral of statehood to groups that suffered repression, and revoked the sovereignty of states that seemed to block the desire for self-rule. But ensuring statehood for every aspiring
nationalist movement, or congruence between national identity and territorial boundaries, remained a practical impossibility. The gap between physical control and legal entitlement grew more glaring. The newest states tended to be fragile, prone to civil war and internecine violence, and dependent on the international community. Bosnia, East Timor and Kosovo each functioned under international protectorates after gaining independence.

Accompanying this spike in the recognition of new states, moreover, was a dramatic increase in de facto states, built by separatist movements which declared independence and managed to maintain a more or less consolidated territorial and administrative base. De facto states such as Somaliland and Abkhazia carved out footholds from territories that newly recognised parent states proved incapable of controlling, despite their ostensible sovereignty. Like their parents, de facto states depend heavily on foreign patronage for economic and military support. The persistence of de facto states and the weakness of ostensibly sovereign new states demonstrated the increasingly questionable worth attached to sovereignty as a whole.

American equivocation, particularly but not exclusively over the fate of Iraq, added to ambiguity about sovereignty. After crushing Iraq in 1991, the United States pushed the UN Security Council to impose draconian economic sanctions and an invasive weapons-inspection programme. A no-fly zone, ostensibly used to defend the Iraqi people from recriminations by Saddam’s troops, abetted the formation of the Kurdish de facto state in the north. At the same time, the US feared Iraq’s potential Balkanisation and sought to preserve its territorial integrity. The 2003 invasion of Iraq deepened the confusion. The US described its actions as an intervention motivated by the principle of preserving peace and stability, not conquest. But invasion and regime change was an obvious breach of the rules of sovereignty. Other countries came to appropriate US rhetoric, as American scholar Tanisha Fazal put it, ‘to justify interventions that turn into occupation that turn into conquest’.

Though critical of the US invasion and neurotic about anything that could threaten its own sovereignty, Russia used precisely this rhetoric in its wars with Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine from 2014. Anticipating a future in which they could exercise such prerogatives, rising powers such as Brazil,
India and China similarly came to support selective and self-serving notions of intervention, even as they defended traditional sovereignty. Disorder among the greater powers had ramifications within regional subsystems. Iran, like Nigeria, South Africa and other would-be regional powers, saw the opportunity to exert its own hegemonic designs in the Middle East, starting with Iraq, putting further stress on fragmented regional order.

Accompanying changes in the international system were technological developments that promised to change how power could be generated and projected. From drone strikes to cyber attacks to financial warfare, new instruments of power transcended territorial boundaries. Unlike the atom bomb, or the dreadnought before that, these capabilities were not confined to a handful of states but became widely accessible to actors in the international system, including non-state actors. In the Middle East in particular, information technologies granted relatively small states such as Qatar and non-state organisations such as al-Qaeda, Hamas and Hizbullah an outsized voice that could effectively set regional agendas. Instability within the international hierarchy made the search for a coherent replacement to the mid-twentieth-century version of sovereignty exceedingly difficult.

**The 2011 revolutions and the search for new rules**

The protests that erupted in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and elsewhere in 2011 did not begin with demands for new states. Yet they confronted Arab regimes at a common weak point – their facile claims to embody sovereignty as national self-determination and popular will. The ubiquitous slogan of protest, ‘The people want the downfall of the regime’ (ash-sha’ab yurid isqat an-nizam), demolished this pillar of regime legitimacy. Protesters adopted common tactics for confronting authoritarian power, appropriating the state’s own slogans and emblems of patriotism and national identity. Egyptian protesters, for instance, hijacked National Police Day to stage their demonstrations. New information technologies, such as SMS, Twitter and satellite television, diffused political messages at an unprecedented rate. This was uniquely challenging for Arab republican regimes precisely because they staked so much of their legitimacy on channelling popular will and defending national integrity from foreign domination. National armies
could not easily fire on protesters draped in the national flag, even if it was to protect the president.\textsuperscript{57} Moreover, the army, police and intelligence services harboured their own institutional agendas regarding access to money and power, which overrode the duty to defend the leader at all costs.\textsuperscript{58}

With the state’s coercive grip suddenly weakened, all kinds of political movements came forward to make claims. Some opposition movements sought to upend regimes while laying claim to the entirety of the existing unitary states.\textsuperscript{59} Others tried to carve out new territorial foundations for statehood or reinstate previously discarded ones. Split between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, Kurdish factions were eager to make up for the diplomatic and military shortfalls that they had experienced after the First World War. In Yemen, al-Hirak was initially wary of the protest movement in Sana’a and the possibility of brutal government suppression, but then launched its own ‘Day of Rage’ in Aden on 11 February 2011.\textsuperscript{60} Libya’s breakdown has yielded two distinctive state aspirants. In the east, partisans of al-Barqa (Cyrenaica) refused to recognise the standing of the transitional government and demanded significant regional autonomy based on the pre-1951 constitution.\textsuperscript{61} In the south, Tuareg fighters who had been recruited into the service of Muammar Gadhafi formed the core of the Mouvement national de libération de l’Azawad (MNLA) and seized control of northern Mali. The MNLA declared Azawad’s independence on 1 April 2012, a move that had reverberations across the Sahel.\textsuperscript{62} ISIS similarly exploited sites of localised administrative weakness in Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Libya to establish its territorial foothold. Whether secessionist or unitarian, all of these groups found themselves in the position of would-be state-builders, mimicking, recreating and appropriating the infrastructure of state power. In the absence of functional state authority, they extorted taxes, construed legal orders and, to varying degrees, imposed bureaucratic control over populations.

The beleaguered \textit{de jure} states reflexively turned to patrons in the regional and international system for their defence. Counter-terrorism imperatives had long implied a need for strong, or at least well-armed, states in the Middle East. Reasserting and reaffirming statehood was particularly important in the face of pan-Islamic actors such as al-Qaeda, which challenged both individual state sovereignty and international society as
a whole. Vacuums of state power, it was presumed, invited infestation by radicals, necessitating a flow of foreign arms and aid to help states maintain and expand their writ. But these commitments were no longer assured. Misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan and the stress of economic recession rendered the United States wary of overextension. Moreover, Wilsonian sympathy for self-determination made it difficult to oppose movements that seemed geared toward democracy and national liberation. As the US and Western powers played Hamlet, Saudi Arabia became Fortinbras, leading a counter-revolutionary coalition that included the Gulf states, Jordan, Algeria, Morocco and General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s Egypt.

For their part, the rebels likewise appealed to international norms and specific great-power patrons for support. De facto states sought to use their hold over cities and towns, border crossings and transit routes, mineral, hydrological and oil infrastructure to enhance their claim to juridical sovereignty, in effect to gain membership in international society itself. The Libyan opposition, trapped in its Benghazi beachhead in 2011, successfully lobbied the US, Europe, and even China and Russia to intervene to avert humanitarian disaster. The ensuing air campaign did more than prevent slaughter; it enabled the rebels to march on Sirte and oust Gadhafi. Five years later, the rival Libyan factions continue to seek support from the US and European powers on the basis of their efforts to fight the expansion of radical groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, and their ability to stem the tide of refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean to southern Europe.

The Syrian opposition, too, vied for patronage and support from the West and from Sunni Arab states. But unlike in Libya, Russia and China refused to countenance full international intervention, leading to an even more prolonged and still undefined endgame. In the province of Hasakah in eastern Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, closely affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey, has assumed administrative functions, providing fuel, seed crops and electricity, and has beat back military encroachment by Islamist forces to establish Rojava, the state of Western Kurdistan. Rojava touts itself as a model of participatory democracy, open to all ethnic and religious groups and an outpost of women’s liberation, but has remained hemmed in by hostility from the Turkish government.
Perhaps the most elaborate case of an extroverted de facto state is the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. The KRG holds itself up as a pro-US outpost of stability and liberal democracy in a sea of chaos, despite corruption and violence on the part of the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party–Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) duopoly. The 2005 Iraqi constitution granted the KRG formal federal status and considerable autonomy. Yet the KRG has always sat precariously. Turkey has consistently opposed the prospect of an independent Kurdistan. Erbil and Baghdad have sparred for years over the allocation of oil revenue and control over the oil-rich region of Kirkuk. In the midst of the ISIS onslaught of 2014, Kurdish forces not only launched a counter-attack (of middling success) but also seized disputed territory around Kirkuk. The Kurdish leadership tried to barter access to oil in return for international sponsorship of its secession and a permanent divorce from Iraq. Secret agreements granted Turkey privileged access to KRG oil fields and allowed the Kurds to use the Turkish pipelines in Ceyhan. Tankers laden with Kurdish oil steamed to Israel’s Mediterranean ports. Ultimately, though, the US rebuffed these efforts and the Kurds were forced back into their unhappy marriage with Baghdad. In many ways, such state aspirants are trying to turn their physical control into juridical sovereignty. It remains to be seen whether the simulacra of sovereignty will someday be mistaken for the real thing.

One seeming exception to such eagerness to engage with international society is the Islamic State. ISIS has shown nothing but contempt for international borders and the underlying norms of sovereignty. Its vision of a caliphate would seem to preclude any territorial boundaries at all. Yet ISIS does much to look and act the state. Indeed, the Islamic State has adopted many of the characteristics typical of governance in the Arab world. Witnesses from Mosul and Raqqa describe ISIS-designated jurists meting out rulings, police apprehending and punishing criminals, and tax inspectors scouring for contraband. Proceedings from legal cases are posted on the internet, as supposed evidence of the virtues of the ISIS justice system. There are even reports of ISIS-issued currency. Oil smuggling provides
Ariel I. Ahram and Ellen Lust

a significant revenue stream. Engineers and technocrats oversee the subsidisation and distribution of water, electricity, foodstuffs and gasoline. A skeletal welfare system offers healthcare and pensions for mujahideen and their dependents. In fact, polemicists specifically highlight the superiority of the Islamic State’s welfare provision to that of the Gulf regimes. Internally, ISIS functions normally – at least by regional standards – even as it purports to revive a mediaeval Islamic empire. Like other revolutionary states before it, ISIS thumbs its nose at international law but appeals directly to the (Muslim) masses for recognition and legitimation. The more migrants, recruits, followers and financial backers the Islamic State’s propaganda attracts, the more legitimate its claim to embody the caliphate.

As state aspirants clamoured for international recognition of their gains on the ground, embattled de jure states hoped to use their standing in the international community to augment their feeble control on the ground. Backed by Russia and China, Assad’s regime in Syria has wielded norms of sovereign immunity and non-intervention as a shield, systematically blocking international observers and relief agencies from accessing rebel-held territories. Bahrain and Yemen invited Saudi military intervention to beat back what they saw as Iranian encroachment on their sovereignty. Iraq maintains a close military alliance with Iran, allowing members of the expeditionary Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps to direct the military campaigns against ISIS. In all of these cases, though, the appeal to outside powers to shore up internal control came at the cost of ultimate diminution within the global and regional hierarchy of states.

States have also made appeals abroad to funnel economic resources into particular ‘useable’ spaces within the rump state. As peripheral zones like Sinai and Upper Egypt, the Sahel, and the Jazeera and Syrian deserts slipped from the state’s grip, heavily fortified capitals (and Erbil, a de facto capital) experienced real-estate bubbles and construction booms catalysed by an inflow of international aid and foreign direct investment. In the Maghreb, state authorities clung to the coastal cities and hunkered down

Assad has wielded norms of sovereign immunity

Assad has wielded norms of sovereign immunity
around the far-flung oil fields and mineral deposits, pipelines and petro-chemical facilities in the interior. Egypt announced intentions to build an entirely new capital city, funded by Gulf investors, somewhere in the desert east of Cairo. Tellingly, the plan was unveiled at a well-guarded south Sinai beach resort, while the peninsula’s interior regions became a redoubt for smugglers, criminals and terrorists.82

In Iraq and Syria, the focus on useable space amounts to a retreat to defensible boundaries. Iraqi plans to retake Mosul from the Islamic State seem to have been postponed indefinitely.83 Yet Iraq’s southern oil fields, which hold nine-tenths of the country’s reserves, produce at full tilt, attracting billions in foreign investment. The arrival of internally displaced people and the relocation of financial capital to government-controlled territories precipitated runs in the housing market, a boon for regime-aligned profiteers.84 In Syria, the military and political situation is even more tenuous. In July 2015, Assad stressed the importance of Syrian independence and criticised Western powers that sought to re-impose ‘imperialism’ on the Syrian people by backing international ‘terrorists’. ‘Each part of Syria is precious and invaluable’, he said, but ‘war has its conditions, strategies, and priorities’. Accordingly, ‘vital areas must be held as to prevent other areas from falling’, while less important regions, particularly where the population appeared to side with the rebels, would be effectively vacated.85 Yet, as in Iraq, capital and population are re-concentrating in government-held zones in Damascus and along the coast, lending the regime a measure of permanence.86 Although Syria’s relatively modest eastern oil fields quickly fell to rebel hands, Russian financing allowed new off-shore drilling rigs to go online, literally beyond the reach of rebels.87

Still, no clear boundaries divide state- and rebel-held domains, and no stark distinction between state and non-state power exists. Beside the formal security apparatus, states have built alliances with all kinds of armed non-state actors, including tribes, religious groups and mafias, in order to augment their coercive power. Sometimes these forces are charged with inflicting maximum damage on civilians with minimal blame for the regime itself. Iraq’s Popular Mobilisation Units and Syria’s National Defence Units have each been implicated in civilian massacres. Other militias function
as free agents, allying alternatively with the state or rebels depending on local circumstances. In the early years of the civil war, Damascus fought mercilessly against Jabhat al-Nusra and the Free Syrian Army, but government forces typically left ISIS positions unscathed. Reciprocally, ISIS largely refrained from targeting Syrian state forces and instead preyed on other rebel factions. Such state-organised crime undercuts the assumption that states will pursue and retain a monopoly over the use of force, a key dimension of internal sovereignty.

Alongside political and military collusion, patterns of economic exchange have sewn together state- and rebel-held territories. Smuggling of foodstuffs, fuels, cigarettes and migrant labourers has been a critical part of the Sahel’s political economy for decades, if not centuries. In the last decade, Latin American drug cartels began shipping cocaine through the region to Europe. Rebels collaborated with, taxed and took over these criminal networks outright. And yet all of this exchange is facilitated by military and government officials across the region; they have taken bribes, issued fraudulent licences and visas, opened up transit centres and ports, provided protection and granted diplomatic cover to these criminals-cum-rebels.

The seams between rebel- and state-held territory in Syria and Iraq have similarly evolved into zones of arbitrage. Oil, arms, narcotics and slaves readily circulate between rebel-held areas, the KRG, Turkey, Syria and Iraq. ISIS has systematically seized weapons and resources intended to help the Western-backed Free Syrian Army or the Iraqi security services and siphoned off the salaries of police officers, judges and civil servants within its domain. Weapons and funds provided by international intervention have become booty in an illicit parallel to the flow of aid and investment within the state-held zones. Rather than pit states and unrecognised state aspirants in perpetual conflict, these interactions have helped push them toward coexistence.

The end of Arab sovereignty?
The breakdown of Arab states since 2011 has reflected uncertainty about how international society should respond to claims of sovereign statehood. The initial protests in 2011 may have emerged unexpectedly, but
the subsequent course the Arab opposition movement took, with so many challengers to sovereignty around the region, was a result of the permissiveness of the global system. Previous generations of would-be state-makers in the Arab world had run up against an international consensus about the immutability of international borders, the impossibility of state death and the impermissibility of state birth. In 2011, none of these obstacles seemed as formidable.

In this sense, the breakdown of Arab regional order is but the latest case in a string of crises that has been enveloping parts of Africa, the Balkans and post-Soviet Eurasia for two decades. *De jure* states such as Bahrain, Syria, Tunisia, Iraq and Yemen are trying to use their status in the international system to gain the tangible and symbolic resources necessary to defend and expand control on the ground. State aspirants such as the KRG, Rojava, the Libyan General National Congress (GNC) and, idiosyncratically, the Islamic State all seek to translate physical control into symbolic standing on the global stage. The outcomes of these contests will be determined largely in the context of an international hierarchy in which Arab states, generally, are weak.

In the coming years, one possible scenario is a return to sovereign dominance, either with the existing two dozen regional states or some higher number. Some de facto states might well break through by diplomatic guile and military might. The Kurds in Iraq are today the strongest candidate. Given the weakness of the state in Libya and Yemen, though, secession is also a possibility there too. The international community might confer sovereignty upon these state aspirants, re-drawing and re-aligning regional maps to accommodate them. The vast majority, though, will probably be excluded diplomatically and, eventually, defeated militarily. With resources dwindling, petitions for international relief will fall on deaf ears. Ultimately, some form of Arab statehood will congeal, hastened by outside powers interested in maintaining the status quo.

A second scenario is that statehood and sovereignty lose their purchase entirely. The existing models of territorial statehood might be rejected. It may be easy to point to ISIS as a singular harbinger of such change. Yet for all of its utopian rhetoric, the interior of the Islamic State is remarkably state-
like. Moreover, like those of other kinds of internal challengers, the Islamic State’s transgressions of sovereignty have elicited a response that has helped to augment states’ coercive power. Jordan, Israel, Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have collaboratively built up their arsenals and further militarised their borders in anticipation of an ISIS challenge. In this sense, statehood is hardly in retreat. On the contrary, it is being aggressively reasserted.

A far greater challenge to statehood in the Arab world comes from international society itself. If the major powers conclude that sovereignty is indeed dispensable, then the faux states of the Arab world are likely candidates to see their statehood dismantled. Terrorism, humanitarian crises, mass population outflows and threats to global energy supply may all spur outside actors to commit greater resources and troops to the region. Interventions can become occupations, and occupations can become the basis for neo-trusteeships or even outright annexation. Though unlikely, a return to this kind of neo-imperial domination is not inconceivable.

Between these two extremes is a third scenario, in which sovereign and non-sovereign political entities in the Middle East come to an uneasy coexistence. Instead of insisting on sovereignty’s ultimate supremacy or its complete dismantling, the international community can find ways to engage with both recognised states and unrecognised state aspirants. This would amount to diluting the value of sovereignty itself. Key resources that the international community had reserved for recognised states, such as multilateral aid, would be allocated more flexibly. Blanket commitments to territorial integrity would be voided. Frail states would tacitly concede pockets where their physical control was demonstrably nil. De facto states would give up the desire for international recognition that would, in effect, fracture existing states. Spatially, de jure and de facto states would sit not just side by side, but in a kind of patchwork, with de facto states pockmarking nominally sovereign territory.

Some of these changes are already in evidence on the ground. In Syria, for instance, local truces and ceasefires have offered respite to civilians caught in horrendous humanitarian disasters. Governance within the Middle East has frequently been conducted through negotiation with local power holders, be they tribal leaders, religious figures or other embedded societal
actors. These arrangements point to the possibility of pragmatic accommodation, instead of unceasing war between state and non-state actors. They could become foundations for long-term conflict management. But conceding the permanence of de facto states may require abandoning the hope of full resolution and national integration – a necessary step toward freezing otherwise bloody and protracted conflicts.

From the perspective of international society, adopting such a stance toward unrecognised states would be more a change in degree than a fundamental reordering of international order. Despite a normative commitment to uphold sovereign states’ territorial integrity, global powers have worked with unrecognised entities such as Somaliland, Abkhazia and other de facto states on issues such as refugees, piracy and terrorism. In terms of security, development and democratisation, de facto states tend to be no worse than their estranged parents. Lack of international recognition does not necessarily doom a place to become a black hole filled by criminals, terrorists and violence.

For the Arab world, dilution of an already diminished form of sovereignty will be a bitter pill. For the last 80 years, the rulers of sovereign states and their rivals have promised that sovereignty would solve persistent problems of political, economic and social backwardness. And yet, on most of these counts, statehood must be judged a disappointment. Finding ways to stabilise the relationships between de jure and de facto power-holders in the Arab world may be the only way to reach a level of governance sufficient for preserving human life and promoting modest economic development. Considering the historical record and the current catastrophic violence, ‘good enough’ may be a worthy goal.

Admittedly, some of these scenarios may today appear far-fetched. Yet a mere five years ago, the suggestion that Egypt would have experienced two changes of regime or that Tunisia would be in the midst of a democratic transition would also have seemed preposterous. The purposeful designs of any single actor in the Middle East, whether state or non-state, regional or great power, will not be enough to reshape the map of sovereignty and statehood. This many-sided, multilayered battle for sovereignty will yield political structures of unforeseen form and stature.
Notes


15 See David Armstrong, Revolution and World Order: The Revolutionary State in International Society (New York: Oxford University Press,
The Decline and Fall of the Arab State


19 Fazal, State Death.


21 Importantly, though, there were discernible expressions of national identity in these areas even before European control. See Reidar Visser, Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 2005); and Rashid Khalidi, Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).


Postage Stamp: A Window on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq’, Middle East Journal, 1993, pp. 77–89.


46 See Adrian Florea, ‘De Facto States in International Politics (1945–2011): A New Data Set’, International Interactions, vol. 40, no. 5, 2014, pp. 788–811. Note that this does not include the most recent de facto states of the Middle East.


50 Fazal, *State Death*, p. 238.


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


Armstrong, Revolutionary and World Order, p. 97.


For the complete speech, see ‘Ar-rais Assad: al-Mu’arika mu’arika mu’hawar mutakamil yu-mathil manhija min al-istiqlaliyya wa al-karama’, Syrian Arab News Agency,


92 Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud and Andrew Reynolds, The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform


