Contentious borders in the Middle East and North Africa: context and concepts

RAFFAELLA A. DEL SARTO*

Following the upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that began in 2010–2011, a major transformation of the regional state system in place since the end of the First World War seemed likely. While pundits were perhaps too quick to predict the collapse of the regional order in the Middle East, the regional state system is undoubtedly under pressure. The aftermath of the Arab uprisings, which developed into civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen, affected many territorial borders in the region. The territorial integrity of states has come under challenge from armed actors, with the potential to lead to their disintegration, and trafficking activities along regional borders have noticeably increased. Three cases stand out in particular: Libya's porous borders and the collapse of central authority after the fall of Gaddafi; the precarious security situation in Egypt, particularly in the Sinai; and the civil war in Syria, together with the advance of the self-declared Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or Daesh. Concurrently, we are witnessing the emergence of distinct political entities or quasi-states, with three very different examples in the form of ISIS, Iraqi Kurdistan and the Rojava–Northern Syria Democratic Federal System established by the Kurds in March 2016.

While borders in much of the MENA region were never hermetically sealed, the changing nature of borders and of their management in recent years is significant at three different levels. First, at the level of international politics, current developments affect the capacity of states to exert sovereignty over their territory.

* This article, and this special issue, are the result of a conference on 'Borders in Transition: Rethinking Sovereignty, Domestic Politics and International Relations in the MENA Region', organized at the European University Institute on 11–12 December 2014, as well as of two panels on 'MENA Borders in Transition' held at the annual conference of the European International Studies Association (EISA) in Giardini Naxos, Sicily, 24–26 September 2015. Previous versions of this article were also presented at the annual conference of the Italian Association for Middle East Studies (SeSaMO) in Catania, 17–19 March 2016; the annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) in Boston, 17–19 November 2016; and at a roundtable at the annual conference of the International Studies Association (ISA) in Baltimore, 22–25 February 2017. The author would like to thank the participants of all these conferences and panels for their valuable feedback. For constructive comments on previous versions of this article I would like to thank in particular Pinar Bilgin, Matthieu Cimino, Louise Fawcett, Lorenzo Kamel, Asli Okyay, and three anonymous referees contacted by *International Affairs*. Special thanks to Louise Fawcett and Asli Okyay for having been great co-editors of this special issue; many thanks to Johanne Kübler for research assistance and to Julie Northey for language editing. This article is one output of the research project 'BORDERLANDS: Boundaries, Governance and Power in the European Union's Relations with North Africa and the Middle East', funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under Grant Agreement Number 263277. The project was hosted at the European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre, until March 2017, and directed by this author. The usual disclaimers apply.

International Affairs **93**: 4 (2017) 767–787; DOI: 10.1093/ia/iix070

This may potentially lead to a redrawing of borders in the region, entailing a profound transformation of the regional and international order. Second, at the domestic level, the altered nature of borders and their management has impacts on the arrangements between the state and specific local or societal groups. For instance, specific actors have been empowered by their growing role in border management, with power shifts 'at the borders' potentially affecting domestic politics. Finally, at the regional level, developments in one state can easily affect events in another, as borders are, or have become, increasingly porous. The circulation of weapons and of armed militants is the best example here. Thus, while we are currently witnessing a significant reconfiguration of power at the regional and domestic levels, the region has remained fragmented but it has also become increasingly interconnected.

A comprehensive and theory-informed exploration of the impact of the current political transition process in the MENA region on the nature and function of borders, with a particular focus on the issues of sovereignty and territoriality, is thus long overdue. Similarly, it is imperative to analyse the implications of these developments at the domestic, regional and international levels, while paying attention to the multiple interdependencies between the three levels of analysis. This is particularly relevant as holistic approaches are generally lacking in the literature. While the empirical contributions to this special issue of *International Affairs* will address this set of questions on the basis of specific case-studies, this article serves as one of two framework pieces. It aims to put the problem of contentious borders in a historical context, while also raising a number of conceptual issues.

The article sets out to analyse the currently contentious nature of many borders in the MENA region by considering the often conflicting configurations of state authority, legitimacy and territoriality over time, with the 'Arab Spring' uprisings marking the most recent of a series of critical junctures. Through this conceptual lens, the article provides a historical overview of key political developments and historical moments that have affected the configuration of these three elements from the formation of the modern state system in the Middle East up to the present. I will consider developments at the international, regional and domestic levels, with attention to the links between them. On the basis of this discussion, and considering both the current changes affecting borders in the MENA region and the high levels of fluidity attending scholarly debates, I will then address the question of whether prevailing conceptualizations of the state and its borders are adequate in arriving at a real understanding of past and present developments in the region.

Concepts and historical context

It has become fashionable to link the current upheaval in the MENA region to the specific conditions under which the state system in the Middle East was created—not least because of the stated obsession of ISIS with erasing the current borders in the Middle East as allegedly established in the Sykes–Picot agreement of 1916.[1]

[1] In fact, the mandate system that would be imposed on the region was defined at the San Remo Conference

Of course, when discussing the current challenges to borders, sovereignty and statehood in the Middle East, history matters. But which historical and political processes are relevant, and how do we conceptualize the challenges to sovereignty and statehood? A number of observations are in order here.

First, the contestation of political authority and territoriality in the region is the result of very complex historical and political processes. Significantly, these processes generally also reflect the contentious legitimacy of the state and of political rule, a crucial feature of Middle Eastern politics up to the present.[2] As discussed further below, the European colonial powers exported the Westphalian concept of the state to the region—although the concept itself was probably never as fully formed as imagined by subsequent scholarship. According to this model, borders were meant to define the authority of the state, its territory, and the population living within it, conceived of as a bounded political community. From the outset, however, and depending on where the borders were drawn and who was put in power within them, the legitimacy of many states and their borders remained contested. After independence, the regimes engaged in the processes of state- and nation-building within the parameters of the Westphalian state and according to a largely imported conception of politics. The tension between the Westphalian state model and the promotion of transnational identities, such as pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism in the case of Arab states, or the idea that the state was to represent world Jewry in the case of Israel, was never resolved. Regional and external actors would exploit these tensions to advance their own political aims and interests. Likewise, the idea of the modern nation-state did not accommodate the existence of what would become important, often transnational, minorities in the region;[3] nor was it compatible with ethnic, religious and tribal identities that continued to prevail in many of these states. Considering the ease with which difference along ethnic or religious lines can be exploited by specific actors for their own political ends (an observation applying to any part of the world), this set of mismatches was to haunt Middle Eastern states throughout the succeeding decades.

Second, the nature and origin of the various challenges to borders and statehood in the region are widely disparate. Some have their origins in the process of state- and nation-building. Others are the result of specific domestic policy choices over time. Still others can be associated with features of regional politics and

of 1920. It implied a departure from the Sykes–Picot Agreement, for instance by establishing Iraq and Syria as two separate states.

[2] Michael C. Hudson, 'Arab politics after the uprisings: still searching for legitimacy', in Larbi Sadiki, ed., *The Routledge handbook on the Arab Spring* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[3] National minorities only became minorities once the nation-state was created; 'during the Ottoman Empire, the categories of majority and minority were largely meaningless': Benjamin Tomas White, *The emergence of minorities in the Middle East: the politics of community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 209. See also Lorenzo Kamel, Karim Makdisi, Waleed Hazbun and Tariq Tell, 'The past: terminology, concepts and historical junctures', in Eduard Soler i Lecha, Silvia Colombo, Lorenzo Kamel and Jordi Quero, eds, *Reconceptualising orders in the MENA region: the analytical framework of the MENARA project*, Methodology and Concept Papers No. 1, Nov. 2016, pp. 7–32 at p. 8–9, http://www.menaraproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/menara_cp_1-1.pdf. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 22 May 2017.)

developments, policies of external actors and/or global processes. The different factors and developments originating at the domestic, regional and international levels tend to intersect and interlink, often with region-wide implications.

Third, the question of state autonomy in the MENA region is relevant. There are of course very different conceptualizations of the state and its formation,[4] but the Westphalian state model undoubtedly continues to underpin both international law and the practice of international politics. Similarly, Theda Skocpol's famous definition of the state as 'a set of administrative, policing, and military organizations headed, and more or less well coordinated by, an executive authority' has remained influential.[5] Considering that the Westphalian state model never fully corresponded to reality—not even in Europe, where it originated[6]—its conceptual strength for analysing past and current developments in the Middle East remains questionable. Similarly, Skocpol's conception of the state, while useful, does not leave any room for differentiating between the diverse functions of the state. Nor does it address potentially different configurations of state–society relations, the territorial scope of state authority or the crucial question of legitimacy.

Specifically regarding the Arab Middle East, it has been argued that Arab states have been wrongly categorized as 'strong states', as this 'strength' did not move beyond coercion and a corporatist social and economic model.[7] Arab states remained weak in terms of institutions and the capacity for both wealth extraction from and the inclusion of their societies, or large parts of them. There has also been a tendency to see the state as a static, coherent and autonomous actor, a misleading conception that informed state-building policies in post-Saddam Iraq.[8] At the same time, state borders are far more complex constructs than any simple line on a map would imply. An analysis of the Syrian–Iraqi border, for instance, shows it to be characterized by an ever-evolving tension between resilience and degeneration. While it has lost certain key functions, the border still continues to define the rules of the game at the local, national and international levels, with the Iraqi and Syrian states still playing important roles.[9] Hence, a strong focus on the presence of the state does not capture the interconnectedness of the region, the porousness and fluidity of borders, the overlapping and intersection of different kinds of borders, and the existence of those areas in between state borders that have been conceptualized as 'borderlands'.[10]

[4] See e.g. Charles Tilly, ed., *The formation of national states in western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[5] Theda Skocpol, *States and social revolutions: a comparative analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 29.

[6] Friedrich V. Kratochwil, 'Of systems, boundaries and territoriality: an inquiry into the formation of the state system', *World Politics* 39: 1, 1986, pp. 21–52; Peter Stirk, 'The Westphalian model, sovereignty and law in fin-de-siècle German international theory', *International Relations* 19: 2, 2005, pp. 153–72.

[7] Nazih N. Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab state: politics and society in the Middle East* (London: Tauris, 1996).

[8] Nida Alahmad, 'Illuminating a state: state building and electricity in occupied Iraq', *Humanity Journal* 8: 2, forthcoming 2017.

[9] Peter Harling and Alex Simon, *Erosion and resilience of the Iraqi–Syrian border*, EUI Working Paper RSCAS 2015/61, BORDERLANDS Project (Fiesole: European University Institute, 2015), http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/37015/RSCAS_2015_61.pdf.

[10] See e.g. David Newman, 'On borders and powers: a theoretical framework', *Journal of Borderland Studies* 18: 1, 2003, pp. 13–25; I. William Zartman, *Understanding life in the borderlands: boundaries in depth and in motion* (Athens,

Finally, and related to the previous point, sovereignty—a fundamental concept as well as a founding practice of contemporary international relations—has remained an extremely ambiguous notion. There is an impressive range of perspectives on sovereignty in the literature, which cannot all be cited here; suffice it to say that the notion comprises related but distinct aspects, such as the international legal sovereignty of states and domestic sovereignty.[11] At present, the international sovereignty of MENA states is, arguably, far less an issue of contestation: in spite of the turmoil in Libya, Syria and Iraq, the international community still recognizes the international sovereignty of all states in the region. In fact, the Middle Eastern state system with its colonial borders has remained surprisingly resilient.[12] Domestic sovereignty, however, is far more problematic. Involving the effectiveness, legitimacy and territorial scope of state authority, this notion directly touches upon the configuration of state authority, borders and territoriality, and legitimacy.

Thus, a state-centric perspective may be helpful for a discussion of the international sovereignty of states and the international order in the MENA region. However, such an approach is not suited to capture the contestation of state authority, the fragile or compromised territorial integrity of states or their legitimacy deficit. Equally, it cannot account for the changing functions of borders and their management, which in turn may affect the domestic sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. Nor is a state-centric perspective useful in assessing the interplay of domestic, regional and international developments in this context.

This article thus proposes to discuss the current pressures exerted on borders in the MENA region by considering the relationship between state authority, territoriality and regime legitimacy over time. Conceptually, the article borrows from Saskia Sassen's seminal analysis of the history of nation-building and globalization.[13] While, for obvious reasons, the historical and geographical scope of this article is far less ambitious, the discussion will be attentive to the intersection of domestic, regional and international dynamics. Such an approach, it is argued, is extremely helpful in seeking to understand the origin and implications of many of the pressures currently bearing on the borders in the Middle East and North Africa.

States, borders and legitimacy in the creation of the modern Middle East

Profound disjunctures between state authority, legitimacy and territoriality lie at the heart of the state-formation process in the Middle East. As the European colonial powers drew many of the borders of the modern states in the Middle

GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

[11] Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: organized hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 3–4. See also Stephen Krasner and Thomas Risse, 'External actors, state-building, and service provision in areas of limited statehood: introduction', *Governance* 27: 4, 2014, pp. 545–67; Louise Fawcett, 'States and sovereignty in the Middle East: myths and realities', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 789–807.

[12] See e.g. I. William Zartman, 'States, boundaries and sovereignty in the Middle East: unsteady but unchanging', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 937–48.

[13] Saskia Sassen, *Territory, authority, rights: from medieval to global assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

East after the end of Ottoman rule in the region, European colonial interests and aspirations by and large created a new regional order in the Middle East.

Certainly, many Arab countries, not to mention Iran or Turkey, had a history as distinct political and social units. For instance, the 'imam–chief type' system of Morocco, Yemen and Oman dates back to a period between the seventh and ninth centuries CE; Lebanon and Syria have been cultural and political centres since the Middle Ages; the political roots of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait go back to the seventeenth century; and Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia emerged as 'bureaucratic–military oligarchies' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[14] In the fourteenth century Ibn Khaldun, in his work *Muqqadimah*, described feelings of belonging and group solidarity (*'asabiyah*) based on blood ties and geography, and non-sectarian nationalism certainly has a longer tradition than is commonly assumed, for example in Iraq.[15] Ilya Harik thus emphasizes that many countries in the Middle East are not only old societies but also 'old states'.[16] However, the responsibility for creating the 'modern nation-state' with defined borders, such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Israel and the smaller Gulf monarchies, lies with the European colonial powers. In the Maghreb, where rule had been based on 'tribal' allegiances, the French and Spanish colonial powers imposed borders where there had been none, 'regardless of any historical local pre-existing factors and without any consultation with the local populations'.[17]

As a result of these processes of external imposition, and given the incapacity of many states to manage their disagreements, the territorial scope of state authority remained contested. Border disputes continue to characterize the region, almost every MENA state having a border demarcation problem with its neighbour(s). To give just a few examples, Algeria and Morocco fought a border war in 1963, and the Western Sahara problem remains unresolved today; the Iran–Iraq War from 1980 to 1988 involved the question of control over the Shatt-al-'Arab waterway; Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was motivated by, *inter alia*, a border dispute (the Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein considered Kuwait an integral part of Iraq); Lebanon and Syria have a contested border; and borders are of course also a prominent factor in the Arab–Israeli conflict. In some rather rare cases, the redrawing of state borders resulted from peaceful negotiations, as for instance between Jordan and Saudi Arabia in 1956, between Jordan and Iraq in 1982, and in the Arabian peninsula in the 1980s and 1990s.[18]

Of course, all borders are artificial in one way or another, and the Middle East is no exception to this.[19] Thinking specifically of geography, few of the borders

[14] Ilya Harik, 'The origins of the Arab state system', in Giacomo Luciani, ed., *The Arab state* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 1–28.

[15] Lorenzo Kamel, 'Artificial nations? The Sykes–Picot Agreement and the Islamic State's narratives in a historical perspective', *Diacronie: Studi di Storia Contemporanea* 25: 1, 2016, pp. 1–20.

[16] Harik, 'The origins of the Arab state system', p. 3.

[17] Kamel et al., 'The past: terminology, concepts and historical junctures', p. 14. See also Jean-Pierre Cassarino, 'Approaching borders and frontiers in North Africa', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 883–96.

[18] Gideon Biger, 'The boundaries of the Middle East: past, present and future', *Studia z Geografii Politycznej i Historyeznej* [Studies in geography, politics and history], no. 1, 2012, pp. 61–7.

[19] Pinar Bilgin, 'Whose "Middle East?" Geopolitical inventions and practices of security', *International Relations* 18: 1, 2004, pp. 25–41.

in the Middle East and North Africa follow geographical features, such as rivers, mountains or deserts.[20] Conversely, many state borders were defined according to the old administrative boundaries of the Ottoman empire, which delimited different districts, subdistricts and provinces. Straight lines, particularly those cutting through deserts, are fairly frequent, reflecting British and French colonial officers' use of the ruler when defining the borders of new states.[21] In the Mashreq and in the Gulf, oil also played a prominent role in the colonial delineation of borders.[22]

Colonial policies towards different ethnic and religious groups contributed considerably to the friction between the legitimacy of state authority and its territorial control. While Middle Eastern borders did not usually delineate ethnic or religious communities, the colonial powers often manipulated ethnic and religious divisions for their own interests, following the old Roman strategy of 'divide and rule'. France created Lebanon, in which the Christian Maronites would become a majority—albeit a thin one—and sought to establish two distinct legal systems for Arabs and Berbers respectively in Morocco. Britain, on the other hand, consented to the creation of a Jewish 'national home' in Palestine. Yet, in general, colonial policies resulted in the creation of multi-ethnic and and/or multi-confessional entities within the newly established borders. Moreover, particularly in the Arab Middle East, the colonial powers assigned authority to specific clans or tribes, which were not always local, reflecting their ignorance of local realities, strategic calculations, and a general sense of superiority.[23] In some cases, the new ruling elites hailed from what would become ethnic or religious minorities within the newly composed citizenry, while some groups, such as the Kurds, the Palestinians and the Armenians, failed to obtain a state or were prevented from doing so. The problem of weak popular legitimacy of regimes in the Arab Middle East, which has remained a significant factor in explaining the contentious nature of borders in the region, is thus also deeply embedded in, and owes its origins to, colonial state-formation practices.

As the European colonial powers controlled the governance of, and admittance to, the international system, the Middle East would remain under their control.[24] Altogether, the new regional order was contested from the outset: a revolt against the British in Iraq took place in 1920; there were anti-British and anti-Zionist disturbances in Palestine from the 1920s on; and anti-French uprisings took place

[20] See John Robert Victor Prescott, *The geography of frontiers and boundaries* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1965).

[21] Legend has it that the zigzag border between Jordan and Saudi Arabia resulted from a stroke of the pen by Winston Churchill, following a particularly liquid lunch, in 1921. See Frank Jacobs, 'Winston's hiccup', *New York Times*, 6 March 2012.

[22] Giacomo Luciani, 'Oil and political economy in the international relations of the Middle East', in Louise Fawcett, ed., *The international relations of the Middle East*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 109–11.

[23] David Fromkin, *A peace to end all peace: the fall of the Ottoman empire and the creation of the modern Middle East* (New York: Holt, 2009). In the literature the concept of 'tribe' has often been used to refer to autonomous social units which rely solely on kinship and blood ties. It is more correct, however, to acknowledge that tribes often share additional traits, such as a common religion and culture as well as economic interdependence.

[24] Eugene Rogan, 'The emergence of the Middle East into the modern state system', in Fawcett, ed., *The international relations of the Middle East*, pp. 37–59.

in Syria in 1925–7. In Egypt, although it was nominally only a British protectorate, there were widespread revolts in 1919, after Britain initially wanted to prevent the Egyptian *wafd* (delegation) from attending the peace conference in Versailles to present its claims for independence—which it eventually did, but without success. There was also resistance against European attempts to create zones of influence in Anatolia in 1922, with the resistance movement rallying behind General Mustafa Kemal, or Atatürk. Thus, between the early twentieth century and 1956, 'the basic framework for Middle Eastern political life was firmly laid—together with many of its still unresolved problems involving disputed boundaries, ethnic and religious tensions and the existence of national minorities'.[25]

Subsequent developments in the process of state formation in the Middle East were no less significant—although within colonial history, the Middle East is by no means an exception. Indeed, the emergence of the state system in the Middle East in the interwar years, and the role played by the colonial powers in this process, are comparable to the experience of large parts of Africa and Asia.[26] Thus, within the new boundaries, state formation took place under strict imperial control, with the colonial powers aiming to expand the monopoly of force to the territory of the state. In addition to a massive investment in the police and security forces, usually at the expense of education, health and other social services, central administrations were established. The new borders, often challenged by nomads, became the subject of tight policing. As elsewhere, the states in the Middle East were generally subjected to colonial economic policies, entailing that the economy was geared towards the benefit of the nationals of the colonial powers, including European settlers, who forged alliances with the large landowners and sheikhs who controlled the rural areas.[27] The distortion of political and economic processes, at the expense of simple peasants and other population groups, was thus partly the result of the colonial powers' reliance on specific segments of society to exert control over the territory under their formal rule.

The colonial practices of state formation also included attempts to create a territorially defined nationality, usually based on a population census. However, reflecting the practice of the Ottoman *millet*, specific ethnic or religious groups were given the right to manage their own affairs; and in some states (Lebanon being the best example), privileges were allocated on the basis of ethnic or religious communities. Once more, the old principle of divide and rule defined the management of religious and/or ethnic differences in the colonial state. Yet sectarian politics not only contradicted the idea of the modern nation-state but also undermined the legitimacy of political rule from the outset.

The process of transferring political power after independence varied across the region, creating instability and a series of military coups. In all cases, however, the

[25] Roger Owen, *State, power and politics in the making of the modern Middle East*, 3rd edn (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 7.

[26] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Etel Solingen, '*Pax Asiatica* versus *Bella Levantina*: the foundations of war and peace in east Asia and the Middle East', *American Political Science Review* 101: 3, 2007, pp. 757–80 at p. 772; also Fawcett, 'States and sovereignty in the Middle East'.

[27] Owen, *State, power and politics*, pp. 12–13.

new rulers faced the challenge of how to reduce the tension between state authority and territoriality that they had inherited from the former colonial rulers. Perhaps an even greater challenge was to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the new citizens. The struggle for independence usually placed the nation-state at the centre, creating vested interests on a *territorial* basis. Thus, the leaders of an independent and territorially defined nation-state promoted the idea of a national identity that was based on the Westphalian model and its inherent trinity of state territory, state authority and people. The new national loyalties, however, continued to coexist in an uneasy way with tribal, ethnic or religious identifications, as in the decolonization process in other parts of the world. As almost all states in the Middle East developed into autocratic regimes or dictatorships, often of a secular type, religious or ethnic groups that had now become national minorities often remained disfranchised.

Simultaneously, however, the idea of a greater Arab nation that transcended colonial borders remained influential.[28] This feature distinguished the anti-colonial struggle in this area from the experience of many Asian and African states. As Arab regimes started engaging in the discourse of pan-Arab unity, tension with the territorially defined national identity emerged, with pan-Arabism also affecting the relationship between the legitimacy of political rule and the Arab states' territorial scope. In the name of pan-Arabism, the 1950s and 1960s also witnessed frequent interferences in the domestic affairs of fellow Arab states, together with growing tensions and competition for regional hegemony within the Arab state system.[29] As Etel Solingen notes, pan-Arabism thus camouflaged the fragility of the state while feeding assaults on the sovereignty of neighbouring Arab states.[30]

In their quest for legitimacy, the new regimes often used or manipulated religion. The strategic use of religion certainly applies to the monarchies of Morocco and Jordan, where the kings regularly invoke their *sharifian* lineage to legitimize their political authority.[31] But even Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, the champion of secular pan-Arabism, used *fatwas* (religious rulings) to justify major policy decisions;[32] he also chose to address the Egyptian people during the 1956 Suez War from the pulpit of the Al-Azhar mosque. In addition to persisting ethnic and religious divisions and the frictions generated by pan-Arabism, the new regimes faced widespread poverty and illiteracy among their citizens, together with various developmental needs. They generally responded to these challenges by extending the powers of the state bureaucracy and the military.[33] These measures would generally ensure the deference of the population, but they would not necessarily enhance the popular legitimacy of the regimes.

[28] See e.g. James P. Jankowski and I. Gershoni, *Rethinking nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); F. Gregory Gause III, 'Sovereignty, statecraft and stability in the Middle East', *Journal of International Affairs* 45: 2, 1992, pp. 441–69.

[29] Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd Al-nasir and his rivals, 1958–1970* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[30] Solingen, '*Pax Asiatica* versus *Bella Levantina*', p. 772.

[31] The present ruling dynasties of Morocco and Jordan claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad.

[32] Owen, *State, power and politics*, p. 29.

[33] Adeed Dawisha and I. William Zartman, eds, *Beyond coercion: the durability of the Arab state* (London: Croom Helm, 1988); Elizabeth Picard, 'Arab military in politics: from revolutionary plot to authoritarian regime', in Luciani, ed., *The Arab state*, pp. 189–219.

This is the origin of much of the pressure exerted on the state and its boundaries in the Middle East that we can observe today. While colonialism laid the foundations of the contentious nature of statehood and sovereignty, specific domestic practices of state- and nation-building after independence, together with regional and international policies and developments, would increase the pressures exerted on MENA borders even further.

Authority, legitimacy and territoriality after independence

The politicization of religion and religious sectarianism

The rise of political Islam and the growing politicization of religious sectarianism have been, and continue to be, major factors affecting the relationship between authority, legitimacy and territoriality in the Middle East. Postulating religious identifications as the only valid organizing principle of politics, political Islam and religious sectarianism have emerged as extremely powerful challengers to the legitimacy of political rule. The rise of Islamism and sectarianism is a result of a range of domestic, regional and international dynamics, with individual agency being crucial in the process of manipulating religious identities for political ends.

The idea that the religious community, the *umma*, should be the basis of socio-political life goes back to Islamic modernism, the movement that emerged under the leadership of the highly influential scholar Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and his follower Mohammed 'Abduh in the second half of the nineteenth century. Islamic modernism was a defensive reaction to European colonialism, but it also sought to modernize Islamic faith and to reconcile it with western values, such as nationalism, rationality and progress. The early Islamist movements, such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, adopted these ideas, thus opposing non-religious rule and, theoretically, the very concept of the modern nation-state.

Religious and sectarian tensions have always existed in the MENA region, with the 15 years of civil war in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 being an extreme example here. Specifically the schism between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, going back to the seventh century, has a very long history. However, this division became politically relevant mainly during the Safavid dynasty's rule over the Iranian empire between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, leading subsequently to the establishment of different zones of influence between Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Many ethnicities in the region, such as the Kurds, had and have Sunni and Shi'a branches whose ethnic identity existed, and continues to exist, in parallel to a sectarian identity. It should also be noted that sectarian clashes in medieval times were very different from those in the age of the nation-state, when belonging was radically redefined.[34]

Political Islam, in its different forms, and religious sectarianism had thus been present in MENA societies for a long time, but were formerly far less significant in

[34] Lorenzo Kamel, 'There is no Thirty Years' War in the Middle East', *The National Interest*, 29 Aug. 2016; 'The real roots of Iraq's Sunni–Shia conflict', interview with Fanar Haddad, *Vox*, 20 June 2014, http://www.vox.com/2014/6/20/5827046/who-are-sunnis-who-are-shias.

the political marketplace. This would change in the aftermath of the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, which dealt the final blow to pan-Arabism as a political practice.[35] Two additional factors would contribute to the strengthening of political Islam. First, Islamism filled a void left by the violent suppression of left-wing secular political opposition throughout the Middle East, in which western powers had often acquiesced in the Cold War context. Second, the strengthening of Islamist movements, which often succeeded in presenting themselves as the only non-corrupt opposition and which frequently provided social and educational services where the state had failed, was often the result of a process of being co-opted or being granted greater room for manoeuvre by the respective regimes. This occurred often for domestic political reasons linked to the quest for legitimacy, as exemplified by the case of Egypt under Sadat.

As for religious sectarianism more specifically, in the context of the nation-state the Sunni–Shi'a divide obtained a growing political importance once political leaders decided to invoke it, usually for their own political ends. Sectarianism thus served as a powerful tool used by aspiring rulers to legitimize their quest for power, while defying the legitimacy of incumbent regimes. It is no coincidence that the 1970s witnessed the substitution of the traditional Shi'a leadership by a new generation of *politicized* religious leaders. This resulted in a reassertion of Shi'a identity in all Middle Eastern states in which the Shi'as were a marginalized minority, that is, all states except for Iran and Iraq. Following the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran would further instrumentalize the Sunni–Shi'a divide in its attempts to increase the regime's legitimacy both domestically and regionally. As Olivier Roy observes, this divide had been more or less contained by the early 1990s, particularly after Iran's defeat in the eight-year-long war against Iraq.[36] However, while the Iranian Revolution undoubtedly triggered the revival of political Islam in general, the rise of religious identifications must also be put into the context of a general religious revival and the strengthening of ethno-religious movements across the region since the late 1970s, including in Israel.[37]

The continuous rise of—partly radical—Islamist preferences in the region may also be linked to the as yet unresolved Israeli–Palestinian and wider Arab–Israeli conflicts, which provide a perfect breeding ground. Concurrently, the Arab/Palestinian–Israeli conflict is increasingly framed in ethno-religious terms. Indeed, the claim that the Arab–Israeli and Israeli–Palestinian conflicts do not involve land and borders, but rather pit 'the Jews' against 'the Arab/Muslim world' in existential terms, has become prominent in the region, including in Israel. But this is just another example of the instrumentalization of religion in the context of a conflict that basically revolves around borders, territory and statehood. More recently, the political bankruptcy of the Palestinian Authority in the face of continuous Israeli

[35] Fouad Ajami, *The dream palace of the Arabs: a generation's odyssey* (New York: Pantheon, 1998); Nazih N. Ayubi, *Political Islam: religion and politics in the Arab world* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Dale F. Eickelman and James P. Piscatori, *Muslim politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[36] Olivier Roy, *The politics of chaos in the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2007), p. 106.

[37] See e.g. Raffaella A. Del Sarto, *Israel under siege: the politics of insecurity and the rise of the Israeli neo-revisionist right* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017).

settlement expansion, over two decades after the signing of the Oslo Accords, in the territories Israel occupied in 1967, has further contributed to the rise of Islamist preferences. Together with the problems of corruption and mismanagement that characterize the Palestinian Authority, these factors undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of the Palestinian Hamas. It is worth noting, in this context, that borders in the Israeli–Palestinian context are particularly strongly contested, with Israel's control over the Palestinian territories it occupies comprising a complex and fragmented configuration of different types of borders pertaining to territory, people and rights.[38]

It is also significant that the export of Islamist fundamentalism and sectarianism by different states in the region, together with the funding of jihadist movements, has a long history. This includes Wahhabi Saudi Arabia (which provided funding to Al-Qaeda), together with some Gulf monarchies and Iran. In fact, the information and communications technology revolution and the growing access to internet and satellite TV did not necessarily have the effect of spreading education and democracy in the Middle East and beyond, as many had hoped. The broadcasting of extremist and illiberal versions of Islamist preaching has increased as well, generally facilitated by public and private funding from the Gulf region.

To what extent do Islamist movements pose a challenge to the configuration of authority, territoriality, and legitimacy in the region? Most Islamist movements, of which the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots were traditionally the most important ones, contest the legitimacy and authority of state regimes, particularly of the secularist republics. However, most of these movements do not necessarily challenge the territorial scope of the state in practice. Indeed, while advocating the unity of the transnational Islamic *umma*, most of these movements had been contestants for political power *within* a specific political system delineated by state borders.[39] Smaller fundamentalist groups resorted to violence in seeking to topple the regime, as for example in Egypt in the 1990s and during the Algerian civil war in the same decade. However, their ambitions usually remained focused on the territorially defined state as well.

In contrast to those Islamist movements that do not recognize state borders according to their ideology but accept them in their political practice, Salafi or jihadist movements pursue very different objectives, as discussed by Mohamed-Ali Adraoui in greater detail in this special issue.[40] These movements, of which Al-Qaeda and more recently ISIS are the most notable examples, usually try to revise internationally recognized state borders or physically erase them. As is well known, the origins of Al-Qaeda are to be found in the exploitation of religious identities by the West to defeat Marxism and the Soviet presence in Afghanistan

[38] See e.g. Adi Ophir, Michal Givoni and Sari Hanafi, eds, *The power of inclusive exclusion: anatomy of Israeli rule in the occupied Palestinian territories* (New York: Zone Books, 2009); Raffaella A. Del Sarto, 'Defining borders and people in the borderlands: EU policies, Israeli prerogatives and the Palestinians', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52: 2, 2014, pp. 200–216.

[39] Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the people and the state: political ideas and movements in the Middle East* (London and New York: Tauris, 2009), ch. 6.

[40] Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, 'Borders and sovereignty in the Islamist and jihadist thought: past and present', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 917–35.

in the Cold War context. The attention given to Islamist fundamentalists and terrorist groups that operate beyond state borders increased considerably after 9/11.[41] Concurrently, the 2000s witnessed not only the expansion of the Al-Qaeda network throughout the Maghreb and the Mashreq, but also the franchising of 'global jihad'. Hence, these movements defy both the internal and international facets of sovereignty, together with the regional state system as a whole.

Armies, economics and development

Another factor exerting pressure on the relationship between territoriality and state legitimacy is the fact that the region is well armed and has experienced decades of recurrent conflicts and wars. While domestic coercion usually relies on the army and the security services,[42] disputed borders and the desire to cement authoritarian rule against the backdrop of a generally weak popular legitimacy are the main reasons for the region's high level of militarization. Compared to south Asia, for instance, between 1997 and 2006 the ratio of military expenditure in the Middle East to GNP was almost four times as high, military expenditure per capita on average three times as high and arms delivery twelve times as high.[43] Since the 1990s the MENA region has been the most heavily militarized in the world, in terms of military expenditures both in total and as a proportion of GDP.[44]

The central role of the army in Middle Eastern states became linked with specific economic policy choices. In the Arab republics, the military obtained important economic privileges, with the result that the military–industrial complex intersected with policies of state-led industrialization based on import substitution. Oil-rich states developed their rentier economies, with the 'Dutch disease'[45] affecting the region at large. While these policies sustained authoritarianism, they were generally 'unable to deliver resources and services to constituencies previously mobilized through revolutionary or nationalist fervor' in the Arab republics.[46] Conversely, the oil-rich monarchies could allow themselves to literally buy

[41] See e.g. Fawaz A. Gerges, *The far enemy: why jihad went global* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[42] Picard, 'Arab military in politics'.

[43] Bahgat Korany, 'The Middle East since the Cold War', in Fawcett, ed., *The international relations of the Middle East*, p. 80.

[44] Robert Springborg, 'The Middle East is the most militarized region in the world', interview, 18 July 2016, MENARA project, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPyss74rN4I. See also the Global Militarisation Index of the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), referred to by Springborg and available at http://gmi.bicc.de/. This index considers the relative weight and importance of a state's military in relation to society. The main indicators comprise the comparison of military expenditures with the country's GDP and its spending on health, the ratio between the number of military and paramilitary forces and the number of physicians as compared to the overall population, and the ratio between the number of heavy weapon systems and population size.

[45] Coined by *The Economist* in 1977 to describe the internal ailments of the Dutch economy following discoveries of vast natural gas deposits in 1959, the term 'Dutch disease' refers to the negative economic consequences arising from large increases in the value of a country's currency. As the country's currency becomes stronger, exports lose their competitiveness, and imports become cheaper. As a result, non-competitive sectors, such as manufacturing or agriculture, may decline or remain underdeveloped. 'Dutch disease' is primarily associated with natural resource discoveries or development but can result from any large influx of foreign currency, such as foreign aid.

[46] Solingen, '*Pax Asiatica* versus *Bella Levantina*', p. 771.

the population's deference. In both cases, however, the legitimacy of political rule remained weak.

The pampering of dictators by the West, for the sake of stability and its own economic interests (arms sales included),[47] has contrasted with rapidly worsening socio-economic conditions in most MENA states. Over recent decades, economic growth has generally been low and unequal, while populations are growing rapidly, leading to elevated unemployment rates, particularly among the young. High military expenditure in the region, particularly compared to the relatively small budgets for health and education, has further undermined economic development. Concurrently, the neo-liberal restructuring of the authoritarian state has produced ever-widening gaps between rich and poor, weakening the state's legitimacy even further.[48] Particularly in the absence of democratic reforms, the neo-liberal prescriptions for development resulted in the emergence of new economic elites linked to political power, together with growing alienation and discontent in the population at large.

Domestic economic policies have been interlocking with international prescriptions, however, as states have been pressured by the West to adopt the neo-liberal model of development. The policies of the nearby EU, in particular—the largest trading partner of many MENA states—resulted in a further fragmentation within and along state borders. As neo-liberal economic policies increasingly connect the political and economic elites in many Middle Eastern states to the economic elites of the EU and its member states, some regimes were also co-opted into the EU's security policies and the governance of migration control.[49] Against the background of the continuing Syrian civil war and the mass migration of Syrian (and other) refugees to Europe, the EU's attempts to co-opt Turkey into the prevention of unwanted migration is perhaps the best example.[50] With the Mediterranean MENA increasingly turning into EU borderlands,[51] many borders between Europe and the MENA region have witnessed processes of disaggregation, multiplication and, partially, 'outsourcing'. In other words, while governments of MENA states selectively participate in the management of the EU's borderlands, very different types of borders regulate the circulation of different types of goods and different categories of people, with those regulating the flow of goods (and of MENA elites) being increasingly open, and those applying to unwanted migrants being closed. There has also been a proliferation of borders stopping unwanted

[47] Western states, together with Russia and China, are the largest weapons suppliers to the MENA region, with the United States being the largest arms seller in in the Middle East (and indeed worldwide). The MENA region is the world's biggest arms market. See Springborg, 'The Middle East is the most militarized region'; BICC, Global Militarization Index.

[48] See Laura Guazzone and Daniela Pioppi, eds, *The Arab state and neo-liberal globalization: the restructuring of state power in the Middle East* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2009).

[49] Raffaella A. Del Sarto, 'Normative empire Europe: the European Union, its borderlands, and the "Arab Spring"', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54: 2, 2016, pp. 215–32.

[50] Asli Okyay and Jonathan Zaragoza-Cristiani, 'The leverage of the gatekeeper: dynamics of power and interdependence in the migration nexus between the European Union and Turkey', *International Spectator* 51: 4, 2016, pp. 1–16.

[51] Raffaella A. Del Sarto, 'Borderlands: the Middle East and North Africa as the EU's southern buffer zone', in Dimitar Bechev and Kalypso Nicolaidis, eds, *Mediterranean frontiers: borders, conflicts and memory in a transnational world* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 149–67.

migrants. While the EU is involved in exporting border management practices to its southern Mediterranean neighbours—conveniently adapted to the regional context, as pointed out by Simone Tholens in this issue[52]—many borders between MENA states and their respective hinterlands have become increasingly impermeable and closed. Sovereignty, territorial control and state authority, then, have been undergoing an important reconfiguration in the EU–MENA context.

The role of the US intervention in Iraq

Undoubtedly, the events following 9/11, and particularly the US-led invasion of Iraq, marked a significant turning-point in the recent history of the Middle East. As is well known, the toppling of Saddam Hussein created a power vacuum in the region. In the resulting chaos Iran expanded its role and other regional powers began to intervene. The US attempt to democratize Iraq by introducing sectarian politics, used by the Al-Maliki government at the expense of Sunni Iraqis, contributed to a rise in Shi'a influence and a striking increase in sectarian violence in the area.[53] Concurrently, Iran became more assertive after the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan and in particular of the arch-enemy Saddam Hussein of Iraq, while Hezbollah gained power in Lebanon. The US-led intervention in Iraq and its aftermath thus contributed significantly to the growing territorialization and militarization of confrontation between Sunnis and Shi'as in the Middle East, fundamentally disturbing the configuration of authority, territoriality and legitimacy in the region.

However, external intervention also laid the foundations for the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq. The emergence of a Kurdish quasi-state in Iraq followed the imposition of no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq during and after the 1991 Gulf War and was facilitated by the breakdown of state authority in Iraq after the US-led invasion of 2003. Over time the Kurds have changed their political aspirations, from the idea of a greater pan-Kurdistan to autonomy, and perhaps secession, in northern Iraq, and some sort of confederation in Turkey, Syria and Iran. The recent formation of the Kurdish quasi-state in northern Iraq is best explained by the interlinkage of external factors and successful domestic coalition-building, as Johannes Jüde argues in this issue.[54] This quasi-state represents yet another challenge—this time from within—to the Iraqi state, its legitimacy and its borders, and to the broader territorial status quo in the region.

The Arab uprisings and their aftermath

The wave of Arab uprisings that swept through the region after 2011 undoubtedly represents the culmination of the Arab regimes' legitimacy deficit. The aftermath

[52] Simone Tholens, 'Border management in an era of "statebuilding lite": security assistance and Lebanon's hybrid sovereignty', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 865–82.
[53] Marc Lynch, *The new Arab wars: uprisings and anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016).
[54] Johannes Jüde, 'Contesting borders? The formation of Iraqi Kurdistan's de facto state', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 847–63.

of the uprisings also witnessed a combination of (often mutually reinforcing) domestic, regional and international factors, all potentially undermining the authority and the territorial integrity of the states in the MENA region. What had started as peaceful protest movements in most Arab states degenerated in most cases, perhaps with the exception of little Tunisia, into violence. In Syria, the brutal repression of the demonstrations by the Assad regime soon developed into a civil war, entailing a growing erosion of central authority and the regime's loss of territorial control over large swathes of the country. Regional powers and non-state actors (including Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Turkey, Iran and Hezbollah) started intervening, each funding its own militias, or, as in the case of the Lebanese Hezbollah, taking part in the fighting. Involvement in the civil war by the United States and other western powers, as well as by Russia on the other side, added yet another layer of external power intervention, further complicating a peaceful resolution of the conflict.[55] Libya is struggling to retain a single government, with tribal militias fighting each other, nationalists opposing Islamists, revolutionaries fighting former Gaddafi elites, and regional actors (such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates) picking their sides. In the Libyan case, central authority and territoriality are currently non-existent, with large domestic groups opposing (and fighting) the internationally recognized government led by Fayyez al-Serraj. Egypt witnessed a period of markedly sectarian and exclusionist politics under the democratically elected government of Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was subsequently deposed by a military coup. While the military regime under 'Abd-el Fattah al-Sisi is even more repressive than Mubarak's rule ever was, the internal fragmentation has increased, with the now outlawed Muslim Brotherhood and different jihadist groups challenging the state, its legitimacy, and its territorial control in the Sinai.

Altogether, many borders in the Middle East have become more porous, allowing for an easier circulation of migrants and armed fighters, as well as of trafficked goods. The circulation of arms, deriving from the weapons depots of deposed dictators or imported from abroad, has increased throughout the region, with Libya looming particularly large. The case of the Egyptian–Libyan border, discussed by Thomas Hüsken in this special issue, shows that even before the uprisings, central authority never fully reached the borderlands, with specific groups based on kinship managing large segments of the border, in agreement with the state. For those tribes, cross-border activities, which we would define as smuggling, are a socially embedded activity. Before the fall of Gaddafi, it was mainly focused on consumer goods; but once the uprisings in Libya started, the porousness of the border allowed for the smuggling of weapons.[56] Here, the structure of the transboundary movement of goods was already in place, although the filtering function changed. The porousness of many borders in the region also sheds light on its interconnectedness, as the self-declared integration by ISIS of the

[55] See e.g. Max Fisher, 'Syria's paradox: why the war only ever seems to get worse', *New York Times*, 26 Aug. 2016.

[56] Thomas Hüsken, 'The practice and culture of smuggling in the borderland of Egypt and Libya', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 897–915.

Libyan city of Derna into its realm in mid-November 2014 demonstrated. Since 2015, jihadists pledging allegiance to ISIS have also been present in the Egyptian Sinai.

The growing pressure on borders since the Arab uprisings is expressed in the challenges mounted by violent and armed groups to the status quo all over the region, from Tunisia and Libya through the Sinai to Syria and Iraq. This development was enabled in the first place by the enduring legitimacy deficit of many of these states, coupled with the failure to exert central authority over their territory. The rise of the self-declared Islamic State, which developed from Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other Sunni jihadist groups, is the most obvious example. Profiting from the changing power structure in Iraq and the civil war in Syria, the initial strengthening of ISIS drew on the convergence of interests of different regional players, local groups and tribes.[57] These alliances are, however, neither transparent nor stable, as we have seen. Although ISIS has been losing control over territory since the start of the US-led air strikes in mid-2014, it is expansionist in nature and aims at redrawing the borders of the Middle East according to sectarian lines. ISIS may not constitute a major threat to the state system in the Middle East in its entirety, but it undoubtedly challenges Syria's and Iraq's claims to sovereignty and statehood.

Regional actors are significantly contributing to the further erosion of the legitimacy of the state and its territorial control. Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states have increased their involvement in North Africa and the Middle East, spreading Wahhabi and Salafi ideas that challenge the legitimacy of incumbent regimes and providing funding to their clients.[58] Iran, the long-time ally of the Lebanese Hezbollah, also supports and funds Shi'a militias in Syria and Iraq. Sectarianism is used instrumentally by incumbent regimes and regional powers alike to advance their interests and justify their claims.[59] The breakdown of law and order in Syria, Libya and, to some extent, Iraq undoubtedly provides a fertile ground for pan-Islamist and jihadist groups in the struggle for power amid shifting alliances, rival interests and external interventions.[60] However, precisely because of these shifting alliances and interests, the degree of ISIS's local support and social resilience, and thus its political survival in the long term, remain open to question.

In turn, real or perceived threats to state authority and territorial integrity have fuelled an impressive pace of militarization in the region since the beginning of the Arab uprisings.[61] This trend has resulted in persistent or growing coercion at home as well as military interventions in regional conflicts abroad, with Egypt under Al-Sisi and Saudi Arabia being prime examples. While coercion

[57] Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: a history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[58] See e.g. Sally Khalifa Isaac, 'Explaining the patterns of the Gulf monarchies' assistance after the Arab uprisings', *Mediterranean Politics* 19: 3, 2014, pp. 413–30; Elisabeth Dickinson, 'The case against Qatar', *Foreign Policy*, 30 Sept. 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/30/the-case-against-qatar/.

[59] Lynch, *The new Arab wars*; Elizabeth Monier, 'Egypt, Iran, and the Hizbullah cell: using sectarianism to "de-arabize" and regionalize threats to national interests', *Middle East Journal* 69: 3, 2015, pp. 341–57.

[60] See e.g. Evan Fowler, 'From Raqqa to Derna: exceptionalism in expansionism', *Jadaliyya*, 4 Dec. 2014, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20182/from-raqqa-to-derna_exceptionalism-in-expansionism.

[61] Springborg, 'The Middle East is the most militarized region'; BICC, Global Militarization Index.

does not increase the popular legitimacy of the regimes, meddling in the domestic affairs of neighbouring states only tends to increase the instability of the region as a whole, prompting even stronger militarization. In respect of the challenges to sovereignty, legitimacy and regional order, the interconnectedness between domestic and regional factors forms a dangerous vicious circle.

As a result of the dynamics described here, the modalities of border control have undergone profound changes in many areas. New de facto borders have emerged, for example in Syria and Iraq. Iraqi Kurdistan has continued its path towards autonomy, and perhaps statehood, and the Kurdish-controlled area in northern Syria may go the same way. In the course of the current civil war in Syria, the newly emergent internal borders are controlled by different armed factions, while different parties—the Assad regime, various armed opposition groups or the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)—also control segments of the country's external borders. The evolving nature of the management of these borders, and the presence of different formal and informal border regimes along them, reflects the state of play of the military confrontation at any given moment. As Leïla Vignal argues in this special issue, different areas with competing authorities and legitimacies have emerged, along with new borderlands that are the object of competition for control and intense transborder activity.[62]

As regards Syria's external borders, the border regime also has an impact on relations with neighbouring states. A change in the management of the border reflecting both internal and international dynamics is apparent in the case of Turkey, which moved from an initially rather permeable border with Syria to an impermeable one, albeit in a highly selective way. The variation in the management of the border, in turn, had a profound impact on Turkey's domestic politics. The Turkish case is particularly interesting as it points to the intrinsic relationship between altered patterns of border management and domestic affairs, as highlighted by Asli Okyay in this issue.[63] Thus, the initially porous border with Syria reflected Ankara's political and material support for an Islamist alternative to Assad's regime, while the subsequent closing of the border expressed the Turkish government's firm objection to the materialization of an autonomous Kurdish area across the border in Syria. This objection is largely driven by Turkey's own preoccupation with statehood and sovereignty in the face of the unsettled Kurdish issue at home.

The state and its boundaries in the Middle East: new concepts required?

This article has proposed an analysis of contested borders in the MENA region since the Arab uprisings by considering the development of the relationship between state authority, territoriality and legitimacy over time. This approach helps to shed light on the origin and nature of the pressures currently being

[62] Leïla Vignal, 'The changing borders and borderlands of Syria in a time of conflict', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 809–827.

[63] Asli S. Okyay, 'Turkey's post-2011 approach to its Syrian border and its implications for domestic politics', *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 829–46.

exerted on MENA borders, while accounting for the interplay of different factors that originate at different levels of analysis. This perspective permits us to aggregate the variety of developments that are resulting in a region-wide challenge to the borders in the Middle East at present. While the approach adopted here may certainly be broadened in time and scope, it may also be worthwhile to explore alternative conceptualizations of the state and its borders, so as to assess the impact of the contentious nature of MENA borders since the uprisings of 2011.

For instance, it may be useful to rethink the historical context of state formation by focusing on the delineation of different hierarchies of spaces through different frontiers and boundaries over time.[64] Similarly, a focus on the changing composition of territory, authority and *rights* throughout the ages, as Sassen proposed in another geographical context, may be helpful.[65] In this vein, during the Ottoman empire, the configuration of authority, territorial control and rights varied across the region and shifted over time, with the Sublime Porte exercising different forms of direct and indirect control over the various provinces of the empire. The colonial state in the Middle East presented yet another specific configuration of authority, territorial control and rights. As noted above, in this phase rights were granted, for instance, to those segments of society that were involved in controlling parts of the territory, such as large landowners, tribal sheikhs and European settlers. This pattern changed dramatically in most states after independence, as the new rulers sought to exert direct control over people and territory with the help of the army and the security apparatus. A focus on rights may thus yield additional insights into the different pathways taken by sovereignty, statehood and the legitimacy of state authority in the region.

Likewise, most scholars would agree that borders are complex institutions regulating the degree of exclusion and inclusion, the degree of permeability and the modalities of transboundary movement.[66] Thus it may be helpful to unpack the specific function, nature and management of different types of MENA borders, and to observe the changes that have taken place in these factors over time. This approach draws on the idea of disaggregating different types and functions of borders from one another, as in the case of the changing patterns of control of Syria's external and new internal borders, discussed by Vignal, and the management of the Libyan–Egyptian border, discussed by Hüsken.[67] Similarly, although the myriad borders imposed by Israel in the West Bank may differ widely in their nature—physical, legal or functional—their definition and management by Israel is also a clear expression of power relations.[68]

In this context, it may be useful to follow Rainer Bauböck's differentiation of territorial borders according to two structural characteristics: namely, perme-

[64] Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: territory and state formation in the modern world* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).
[65] Sassen, *Territory, authority, rights*.
[66] See e.g. David Newman and Anssi Paasi, 'Fences and neighbours in the postmodern world: boundary narratives in political geography', *Progress in Human Geography* 22: 2, 1998, pp. 186–207; Anderson, *Frontiers*; Cassarino, 'Approaching borders and frontiers in North Africa'.
[67] Vignal, 'The changing borders and borderlands of Syria'; Hüsken, 'The practice and culture of smuggling'.
[68] Del Sarto, 'Defining borders and people in the borderlands'.

ability and stability over time.[69] He thus distinguishes between stable and permeable borders (membranes), stable and impermeable borders (walls) and unstable and impermeable borders (barricades). Indeed, from this perspective a set of questions about borders are relevant for our purpose. Are specific borders territorial or functional, or both? Do they relate to people or goods, or both? Are they porous or closed, fixed or mobile? Has there been a change in their permeability? Have they moved or multiplied? What is their specific function, and who manages and controls them? What are the domestic, regional and international implications of the function and scope of borders and what is the impact of possible changes in their function and scope? This set of questions allows for a problematizing of the nature as well as the territorial dimension of state sovereignty and autonomy, together with the configuration of state–society relations. This, in turn, may be extremely useful in attempting to capture the domestic, regional and international dimensions of the current state of affairs in the Middle East. In a similar vein, it is essential to integrate theories of state formation and state failure into our analyses, as Louise Fawcett argues in her contribution to this issue.[70]

Developments in the region since the Arab uprisings may also validate a quite different conceptualization of the state and its borders: one that focuses on the centre of gravity. According to this model, 'the concept of centre of gravity identifies centres *that do indeed hold* even as their boundaries are increasingly fuzzy'.[71] Here, a distinction is made between the military–fiscal centre of gravity, the political centre of gravity and the cultural centre of gravity, which may or may not overlap. While it may be necessary to add other centres of gravity to this model, it is important that the model stipulates the fuzziness and fluidity of borders, together with the existence of different cores and peripheries within 'the state'. Thus, it can also easily accommodate the concept of borderlands. This is not to say that we should start thinking of the Middle East as 'tribes with flags', as the veteran Egyptian diplomat Tahseen Bashir famously put it, or that we are likely to go back to the ages of empire. These conceptions of Middle Eastern politics would be an exaggeration, particularly since many of the national and territorially based identities in the Middle East are surprisingly strong—perhaps against the odds. In fact, their resilience will determine the survival of the state system in the region in the long run. But by accommodating the stubborn persistence of states as the most significant element in the theory and practice of international relations, the centre of gravity model may indeed be a useful starting-point in thinking about the current regional order and its transformation. In other words, the state system in the Middle East is still relevant, and the 'Westphalian' state model is, and is likely to remain, the basis of contemporary international relations. But it seems increasingly imperative to consider the concept of the Westphalian state as

[69] Rainer Bauböck, 'Rethinking borders as membranes', in Leanne Weber, ed., *Rethinking border control for a globalizing world: a preferred future* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 169–78.

[70] Tilly, ed., *The formation of national states*; Hendrik Spruyt, *The sovereign state and its competitors: an analysis of systems change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *When states fail: causes and consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Fawcett, 'States and sovereignty in the Middle East'.

[71] Patrick Carroll, 'Articulating theories of states and state formation', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 22: 4, 2009, p. 554 (emphasis in original).

a shell, which is functional for the purpose of international relations, but which in practice contains different models and concepts with a greater explanatory power. Domestic politics matter, including the crucial question of the domestic legitimacy of state authority. Different configurations of authority, territoriality and legitimacy are possible. Similarly, the links between domestic, regional and international politics in defining the nature of sovereignty and territoriality are highly relevant and cannot be ignored.

Whether these or alternative concepts are useful in capturing current events in the Middle East, what their limits are, and whether it is possible to let go of the ideal-type Westphalian concept of the state and its borders from an analytical perspective are key questions that the contributions of this special issue have been invited to explore more in detail.