The State as an Always-Unfinished Performance: Improvisation and Performativity in the Face of Crisis

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The apparent fixity of the state has been produced by state-building projects, but also by the logic of state analysis that needs an object for its study. Encouraging critical reflection on the essentialism often associated with these processes, Pierre Bourdieu argued that these two aspects of "state formation" are contingently and epistemologically intertwined: "to endeavor to think the state is to take the risk of taking over (or being taken over by) the thought of the state."[1] Others, including Ellen Lust in her essay, have focused on state-making practices, and their symbolic and material effects that produce and reproduce the state as dominant idea and as ultimate institutional frame in a particular time and place.[2] Taking this further, Kevin Dunn frames "'the state' as a discursively produced structural/structuring effect that relies on constant acts of performativity to call it into being."[3] It is this performative aspect of state making in all its variety that will be the focus here, echoing themes in the pieces by Lisa Anderson and Rabab El-Mahdi.

In order to develop an argument about the centrality and always-unfinished and contested nature of state performance, the cases of Tunisia and Iraq will be examined. It might seem odd to be holding up for comparison two countries that differ in so many ways. However, the marked contrast in their circumstances may help to underline what they have in common as examples of the continuing and unfinished business of state creation. In both cases, the processes of rethinking and reconstructing the state have taken place after profound if very different shocks—the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq and the 2010–11 revolution in Tunisia. In both cases a dramatic event revealed aspects of their construction that often elude scrutiny in apparently settled and "fixed" states. It is at moments of crisis that fluid, contested, and uncertain performances take place, drawing on past myths and practices, but also deploying significantly different symbolic capital to establish the basis for a reemergent state, recognized internally and internationally, but not unchallenged. In both cases, the state forms that had been produced beyond the visible, formal state institutions in previous eras—the clan-based "shadow state" in Iraq, and elements of what could be called the "Sahelian state" in Tunisia—continue to exert their influence on current state-forming processes.[4]

Thinking about performative politics in distinct, but significantly linked registers helps us to understand how states come into being through a series of acts that require constant iteration and adaptation by a variety of actors. In one sense the performative refers to "performing the political" or the "theater of politics." This brings with it a dramaturgical sense of role construction, of narrative emplotment and display, addressing and mobilizing diverse audiences.[5] In addition, the performative can be understood as a process of enunciation (or bodily enactment) that brings something into being through that enunciation.[6]

From these perspectives the state is the framework for state-making performances, but is also produced by such performances, mutable and contingent, despite the best efforts of its partisans to suggest fixity and to invest this incarnation of the state with symbolic capital. Analyzing these continuing performances brings into focus some key aspects of the imagination and actualization of a state: order, belonging, and violence, as well as the spaces in which these processes take place. Such performances give them substance and imaginative resonance, and underline the centrality of performativity in the production of state spaces, not all of which are territorial.

In Iraq as in Tunisia, the anticolonial struggle called forth an array of performances, collective and individual, geared to internal and external audiences. Shape, form, and substance were given to national identities that were linguistic/ethnic and secular, or Islamic, or a mixture of both. These gave a distinctive character to the independent state. Above all, they set the criteria for which Iraqis or Tunisians were to be formally included in the political community. This in turn raised the question of whether formal inclusion was enough, given the exclusionary mechanisms determining access to power based on education, wealth, and status, themes that Ellis Goldberg develops in his discussion of citizenship. In both countries, the questions arose: whose state and a state for whom?[7]

Continuing social, political, and economic inequalities and repeated insistence on the duties of the citizen and the rights of the state were then justified in the name of order, progress, development, sovereignty, and national interest. In the hands of exclusivist and authoritarian governments citizens became subjects, players assigned to roles in a script over which they had little control, but which many internalized as part of the disciplinary regime of the self. Understandably, this also provoked contestation in both Iraq and Tunisia. Some of those who felt themselves marginalized by and excluded from the state, developed alternative ideas of the state as the legal framework of a distinctive social order. Ranging from liberal and democratic, to Islamist of many kinds, to communist and federalist, to territorially revisionist, these ideas were embodied in protests, demonstrations, strikes, riots, and, in some parts of Iraq, armed insurrections.

In Iraq and in Tunisia, contestation sharpened the repressive inclinations of those who had fought their way to the top, creating an apex of power that effectively identified a single ruler and his networks of patronage as the state itself. Powerful hegemonic discourses were entrenched, enunciated, and performed, having a marked effect on the conduct and framing of public life. This practice became a way of asserting "what the state is about" and was accompanied by sanctions, sometimes ferocious, sometimes quietly marginalizing and excluding, that presented and embodied a particular formation of the state. In a curious and apt conjunction of the processes at work in both countries, it was Iraqi President ʿAbd al-Salam ʿArif who, in 1964, presented the Tunisian state with fully functioning gallows to be installed in the execution courtyard of the notorious prison of "9 avril."[8] The gallows were both symbol of and mechanism for the performance of sovereign power over life and death, a common attribute of the state.

Such performances not only opened up the gap between the citizens and the state apparatus, but also fostered divisions within the body politic itself. It was only at particular moments that a combination of circumstances allowed the Iraqi and Tunisian publics to

re-form in some measure, in 1952, 1958, and 1988–89 in Iraq, and in 1978 and 1984 in Tunisia. In both countries, although in very different ways, protest and opposition to the status quo took shape, creating conditions for the imagination of a new order. Repression followed, sometimes immediately, but also over time as the disillusioning experiences of the rule of ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim and Zayn al-ʿAbidin Bin ʿAli, respectively, demonstrated. In the Iraqi case, it can be argued that the present uncertainty over the place of the Kurds within the Iraqi state, as well as the sectarian framing of the state were consequences of the regime's responses to a politics of defiance in different sectors of Iraqi society in the late 1980s.

These are legacies that those seeking to reconstruct the state in Iraq after 2003 and in Tunisia after 2011 have exploited and tried to counter. Those years of crisis and their aftermath opened up the space for new imaginings of state order and for the refounding of political institutions, based upon new constitutions. The 2005 Iraqi Constitution and the 2014 Tunisian Constitution were intended to map out the new rules of the game. In both cases, there was substantial support for the idea that state performance would no longer be the exclusive affair that it had once been, that it should be systematically answerable to the citizens through their representatives. In practice, the key performances in the years that followed, although more circumscribed in Tunisia than in Iraq, have tended to reinforce the argument that the state comes into being through practices, only some of which are governed by constitutional provision.

In Iraq and Tunisia, in different ways, maintaining inequality has been an idiom and a practice of power, sometimes explicit but often implicit, favoring certain communities, regions, and classes, and building their privilege into the iterative performances of the state. In the Iraqi case, both in Baghdad and in Erbil, the maintenance of these networks has given rise to the lineaments of successor "shadow states" standing behind and running through formal state institutions.[9] In Tunisia, the patronage networks emanating from the centers of privilege are reinforced by a highly centralized system of administration that tends to concentrate executive power, presently visible in President Beiji Caid Essebsi's (al-Baji Qaʾid al-Sibsi) advocacy of constitutional revision towards a presidential regime.[10]

Examples of such preconceptions about order, and of the fracturing of that order, abound in both Iraq and Tunisia. They manifest themselves with different kinds of intensity and, in their performance, have different implications for the emerging state. Thus in Iraq, the performances of a politics that is predicated on communal (sectarian and ethnic) difference and on the relative advantages and disadvantages of belonging to such communities, has produced a state form that reinforces such differences and, through their performance, has sharpened state contestation.[11] In Tunisia the promotion of a "start-up democracy," suggesting neoliberal enterprise and its necessary inequalities, has been countered by those who believe a fairer distribution of wealth is the key to the construction of a state for all Tunisians. The effort to contain within the emerging framework of a parliamentary republic the social and economic antagonisms that are performed daily throughout the country has also left its mark on the shapes, structures, and ideals of the Tunisian state.[12]

Given the centrality of the imaginative, affective, and mobilizing principle of the nation in the constitution of the state, it is important to understand the ways in which these performances have helped or hindered the cohesion of a national community that is,

theoretically at least, embodied in the state. Here the contrast between Iraq and Tunisia might seem to be glaringly obvious. In Iraq, state practices associated with systematic discrimination, historically as well as since 2003, have produced insurgencies by those who reject what the Iraqi state is becoming, as Ariel Ahram brings out in his contribution. Most recently this has been seen in the drama of the Kurdish independence referendum, and in the spectacular performances of the Islamic State since 2014. In Tunisia, the repertoires are different, but the alienation from a state that seems to serve the interests only of a small, privileged section of the population is palpable amongst those who feel the state has left them behind, and who feel the repressive edge of that state most sharply. Indicators of such alienation can be found in the fact that only 11 percent of Tunisians aged 18–34 claim that they regularly vote in elections, and significant numbers of the same age group make strenuous, repeated, and often-dangerous attempts to migrate.[13]

Violence, explicit and implicit, has long been associated with state-making performances. For some it is the very token and embodiment of a functioning state, expressed through coercive force or its threat, and incorporated into the laws that sanction its use against those who threaten the dominant social order, as Rabab El Mahdi describes in the Egyptian case. In the aftermath of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, the violence of the insurgency and its development into civil war brought about the Iraqi government's "reconquest of the provinces" from 2008, asserting by force the return of the state across the country. This in turn laid the groundwork for the insurgency of the Islamic State in 2013–14, its conquest of much of northern Iraq, and the government's subsequent painful efforts to recapture lost state territory. In Iraq, violence has been the most prominent state-performing process, producing distinct configurations of state institutions, as they battle against those who are violently opposed to what the state is becoming.[14]

In Tunisia, the structural violence of the political economy sparked the revolution in 2010–11 but has not been addressed and therefore persists, as does the institutional violence of key parts of the state's security apparatus. In the theatrical sense of performance, demonstrators in Kasserine in January 2016 protested against neglect and unemployment by sewing their lips together, making shockingly visible through self-inflicted violence the degraded conditions of their lives.[15] Meanwhile the performative violence of the state security forces has been increasingly used against growing protests in the marginalized and otherwise-neglected regions of the Tunisian interior and south.[16] At the same time, the periodic assassinations and acts of terrorist violence by those inspired by certain Islamist "jihadist" ideals, have provoked the state authorities into constructing a program of increased securitization.[17] Here too performative violence has been a productive force that is having its effects on the reconfiguration of the Tunisian state.

The performative politics of order, inclusion, and violence may contribute to, but can also hinder, the creation of a state space that is commonly understood and shared by all citizens. In Iraq, torn by insurgency, civil war, and communal violence, and threatened with incipient secession, the space for counterperformances has been relentlessly reduced. This was evident in government responses to the mass popular protests of 2015, as well as in the intimidation of those who try to escape from the largely confessional and ethnic categories of licensed Iraqi political performance. In the process, a state is emerging that bears the marks of the performative politics that have brought it

into being, violent and divisive as they have been. Even in Tunisia, where the variety of performances since the revolution may be opening up new kinds of state spaces, there are enduring fears about the relationships of many of its citizens with state agencies and the implications of the behavior of these agencies for the kind of state that may be emerging. These concerns are central to the understanding of a performative politics in state making that the examples of Iraq and Tunisia allow us to assess. These processes may be more visible in these two countries precisely because of the nature of the crises they have been experiencing, but they are no less present even in apparently more fixed and stable states.

NOTES

[1]Pierre Bourdieu, "Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field," *Sociological Theory* 12 (1994): 1–18.

[2]Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," *The American Political Science Review* 85 (1991): 77–96; Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber, eds., *State Sovereignty as Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Roxanne Doty, *Anti-immigrantism in Western Democracies: Statecraft, Desire and the Politics of Exclusion* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[3]Kevin C. Dunn, "There Is No Such Thing as the State: Discourse, Effect and Performativity," *Forum for Development Studies* 37 (2010): 80.

[4]Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 259–67; Lisa Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830–1980* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 231–50.

[5]Julia Strauss and Donal Cruise O'Brien, eds., *Staging Politics: Power and Performance in Asia and Africa* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2007): 1–14.

[6]Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

[7]Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005); Mohamed Chérif Ferjani, *Prison et liberté* (Tunis: Mots passants, 2015); Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The political Economy of Repression in Tunisia,* trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011): 267–91.

[8]Malek Gnaoui, *0904*, installation in Dream City, Tunis, 4–8 October 2017.

[9]Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[10]Emir Sfaxi, "In with the Old in Tunisia," *Sada – Middle East Analysis*, 28 September 2017, accessed 8 November 2017, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/73252.

[11]Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq – Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011).

[12]"Tunisia: A Start-up Democracy," YouTube video, 1:01:17, speech by Mehdi Jomaa (former prime minister of Tunisia), the Belfer Center, Kennedy School, Harvard University, 26 February 2015, posted 6 January 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wljo-lXeqTI.

[13]Sarah Yerkes, *Where Have All the Revolutionaries Gone?* CMEP, Brookings Institution, 2017, accessed 23 November 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/research/where-have-all-the-revolutionaries-gone/; Olfa Lamloum and Mohamed Ali Ben Zina, eds., *Les Jeunes de Douar Hicher et d'Ettadhamen : une enquête sociologique* (Tunis: International Alert/Arabesques, 2015).

[14]Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future,* Carnegie Middle East Center, 2017, accessed 17 October 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810.

[15]Oana Parvan, "Unruly Life: Subverting 'Surplus' Existence in Tunisia," *Mute*, 2 February 2017, accessed 7 June 2017, http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/unruly-life-subverting-%E2%80%98surplus%E2%80%99-existence-tunisia.

[16]Raphaël Lefèvre, "The Roots of Growing Social Unrest in Tunisia," *Journal of North African Studies* 22 (2017): 505–10; Abdelkrim Dermech, "Un message de fermeté et d'espoir," *La Presse,* 11 May 2017. President Essebsi announced the deployment of the Tunisian army to "protect" gas and oil production sites in Tatouine from a sit-in by protestors.

[17]Corinna Mullin, "Tunisia's 'Transition': Between Revolution and Globalized National Security" (POMEAS paper, no. 8, September 2015), accessed 17 January 2017, http://www.pomeas.org/index.php/publications/pomeas-papers/495-tunisia-s-transition-between-revolution-and-globalized-national-security; Edmund Ratka and Marie-Christine Roux, "Jihad Instead of Democracy? Tunisia's Marginalized Youth and Islamist Terrorism" (international report for the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, April 2016), accessed 23 November 2017, http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.44290/.