

On the Making and Unmaking of Arab States

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Since 2011, Arab states have faced unprecedented challenges to their territorial integrity. Movements in Kurdistan, southern Arabia, and Cyrenaica have all made unilateral bids to secure administrative and coercive control over territory. While some disavow secessionism, their agendas for separation clearly undermine their respective parent state, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. Added to this is the Islamic State (IS), intent on breaking all the borders of the region and establishing a new caliphate. It is easy to see the emergence and empowerment of these movements as steps in the crumbling of artificial colonially constructed states and the reassertion of more ancient and organic clan, sect, and tribal allegiances. Yet these movements represent less a reversion to primordialism than a reassertion of claims to self-determination that had been overridden in the course of 20th-century state formation.

Separatists do not appear out of nowhere. In the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia preexisting ethno-federalist structures were separatism's springboard. Autonomous republics and regions were supposed to mollify demands for self-determination and independence. Instead, when the central government faced crisis, the leaders of autonomous republics and regions used these institutions as platforms to demand independence. Along with segmentation, state sedimentation and what Philip Roeder calls "conquered state syndrome" also gives rise to separatism.¹ The experience of having once enjoyed self-governance grants groups the institutional structures necessary to undertake rebellion. The revocation of that autonomy gives them motivation to breakaway. Failed efforts to obtain autonomy provide a historical repertoire to assert claims to independence and counteract the integrative efforts of state building.

Until recently, disintegration was not a major concern of scholarship on Arab state formation. Iliya Harik and Michael Hudson wrote about the "horizontal" challenge to Arab states, but presumed that vertical agglomeration was a foregone conclusion.² Most studies concurred with Nazih Ayubi's memorable phrases about fierce but weak Arab states.³ Oil and strategic rents granted states the ability to bribe their populations into acquiescence or to build ruthless security services to beat down dissent. Norms of territorial integrity and external interventions made border adjustments impermissible and protected existing territorial arrangements.⁴ Consequently, as Charles Tripp describes in this symposium, Arab states often posed as immutable and fixed entities. The uprisings of 2011 revealed just how sclerotic many Arab states had become, unable to provide basic welfare and security to their own citizens. Insurgencies and civil wars roiled across the region and scholars began to question the permanence of Arab states themselves.⁵

Examining the sedimented history of state formation in the Arab world forces us to revisit how Arab states emerged and endured—and how they might change. Colonial power certainly played a large part in defining the shape of Arab states, but indigenous actors had their own agency and authored their own drive for statehood, alternating between resistance and cooperation with imperialists.⁶ Importantly, these actors invoked

norms of self-determination announced during the “Wilsonian moment” at the end of World War I. Though not immediately triumphant, the ideas became core principles of the international system through the second half of the 20th century.⁷

The separatist movements that arrived and expanded since 2011 are heirs of state-building projects forsaken during the 20th century. Just as they had in the past, they have sought to solidify their control on the ground while they appealed to the strategic interest and humanitarian impulses of foreign powers. The Kurdish movements in Iraq and Syria cite the abnegation of Kurdish claims to self-determination following World War I in justifying their demands for political autonomy. From the 1920s to the 1950s, Kurdish leaders repeatedly sought to block their incorporation into existing states and created alternative political structures, including the Kingdom of Kurdistan, the Jazeera autonomy movement, and the Mahabad Republic. Following the decimation of the Iraqi state in the 1991 Gulf War, Kurdish factions effectively broke away from the Iraqi state and gained *de facto* autonomy in northern Iraq. For over a decade the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) operated as if it were a state. Iraq’s 2005 Constitution formalized KRG autonomy, but there was no agreement about the balance of responsibilities or power between the federal and regional governments. KRG President Massoud Barzani, who was born in Mahabad in 1946, opined that conditions were ripening for Kurdish independence. When the Iraqi state buckled amid the IS insurgency and civil war in 2014, KRG forces extended their control to Kirkuk, an oil-rich area that the Kurds had long claimed as their capital. Yet the Kurdish gains in Iraq proved ephemeral. In October 2017, ignoring warning from the central government and neighbouring states, Barzani went forward with a long-belated referendum on independence. The outcome was a resounding “yes” vote, but the euphoria was short-lived. Baghdad, backed by Iran and Turkey, responded militarily, retaking much of Kirkuk and Mosul and the crucial border crossings and airport, effectively stifling the independence bid.

The 2011 crisis in Syria also opened a window of opportunity for the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a left-wing Kurdish political party closely tied to the Turkey’s PKK, to take over effective control over cantons in the northeast and north. Syrian Kurds did not have a federalist platform of the KRG in Iraq from which to launch their separatist bid. But when the Syrian state collapsed in civil war in 2011, Kurdish operatives immediately stepped in, running courts, co-ops, and Kurdish-language schools. While the PYD avers loyalty to the Asad regime, it envisions Syria’s complete restructuring into a kind of ethno-sectarian confederation, similar to what it had been under the Mandate. Importantly, both the PYD and KRG appeal to the international community as democratic bastions amid autocracy. They further tout their service to global stability by combating jihadist forces, particularly the IS.⁸ Like the KRG, Rojava’s status remains uncertain.

In Libya, the Cyrenaican separatist movement also traces its origins to mid-century promises of self-determination. As part of the Ottoman Empire, Cyrenaica was a semi-autonomous political unit under the leadership of the Senussi Order, a hybrid spiritual movement and tribal alliance. When Italy invaded Libya in 1911, the Senussis led a sporadic but protracted thirty-year campaign of guerrilla war, ultimately allying with Britain on the promise of independence. At the end of World War II, the United Nations moved to unify Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and the Fezzan into the state of Libya. Idris Senussi, leader of the Senussi Order and amir of Cyrenaica, became Libya’s first king.

Under the 1951 constitution, Cyrenaica enjoyed broad federal autonomy, including its own parliament and armed forces, and remit over the large oil deposits in the province. Cyrenaica's tribes were bastions of monarchical power. Yet constitutional revision in 1963 abolished federalism and undermined this autonomy. Al-Qadhafi's coup in 1969 further centralized power in Tripoli at the expense of the east. The breakdown of the Libyan state in February 2011 gave easterners a chance to redress their marginalization. The rebellion began in Benghazi, the largest city in the east, but was not inspired by any specific regionalist agenda. Yet as the revolution progressed and the power of the central government collapsed, Cyrenaican tribes filled the vacuum. They began to agitate for a restitution of the 1951 federal constitution, including a larger share of oil revenues. Defying the ineffectual transitional government and its inept successors, federalist forces seized control of oil installations and disrupted elections. When civil war erupted again in 2014, the federalist movement backed the House of Representative (HoR) that was forced to relocate to the east.⁹ Aligned with Colonel Khalifa Haftar, the HoR and the federalist factions declared their intent to root out jihadi groups in Benghazi, Derna, and Sirte and rejected the Western-backed government installed in Tripoli. Though Haftar eventually overpowered the federalists factions, the effect of their alliance endures, as Cyrenaica has become administratively and politically removed from the rest of Libya.

Yemen's Southern Movement (al-Hirak al-Janubi; SM) has an even more recent predecessor in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). PDRY emerged from the revolution against British colonial rule in southern Arabia in the 1960s. The PDRY held itself out as a bastion of progressive Marxism in an otherwise Arab reactionary sea. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and debilitating intraparty conflicts, though, PDRY leaders were compelled to seek unification with their northern neighbor, the Yemen Arab Republic. There was almost immediate regret over the conditions of integration. Proposals for federalism were ignored. In 1994 a brief civil war routed the remnants of the PDRY leadership and solidified the hegemony of President Ali 'Abd Allah Salih. By the mid-2000s disaffected citizens in the south protested what they saw as the north's "colonization." PDRY army veterans demanded restitution of their pensions and social benefits. The SM accused the Salih government of misappropriating oil revenues from the south and neglecting development in the region. They agitated for political devolution that would reinstate a measure of home rule. Violence escalated. The SM was not involved in the initial anti-Salih protests in Sana'a in 2011. Yet the paralysis of the central government allowed SM to gain control over Aden and other parts of the south. Still, the project of reviving lost political communities remains contested. Many in the SM rejected the proposal of a six-unit federalism offered by the National Dialogue Conference in January 2014, which they saw as a ploy to divide and rule the south. Others, though, approved the plan as effectively resubstantiating political entities such as the sultanates of Hadramout, which predated the independence of South Yemen. When the Houthi forces stormed Sana'a in 2014, the internationally recognized government of interim President 'Abd Rabu Hadi fled to the south and eventually relocated most operations to Riyadh. SM leaders such as 'Idarus al-Zubaydi cut deals with the Hadi government and were granted government sinecures. With support from the Emirates, SM forces fought Iran-allied Houthis, as well as al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula and IS. Yet the SM's rapprochement with the central government was only temporary. In

April 2017 Hadi dismissed al-Zubaydi and other SM leaders on charges of treason. The SM formally declared its intention to re-establish an independent state in South Arabia.

The IS, as in so many things, stands as the outlier. Instead of seeking to reassure the international community, the IS tried to overturn it. It deems the notions of self-determination and nation-statehood as apostasy. Like other revolutionary states, the IS maintains a dual identity as both a territorial state and the hub of a would-be universal movement.¹⁰ Still, the IS cannot escape the thicket of modernist politics. For all of its purported medievalism, the IS's self-conscious adoption of the state (*dawla*) indicates a modernist sensibility rooted in 19th-century Ottoman empire and 20th-century Salafi reformists.¹¹ Still, the leadership and core constituency of the IS are Arabic-speaking Sunnis who grew up as citizens of Iraq and Syria. The IS seemed to initiate a reassertion of Sunni orthodox hegemony upon the ethno-sectarian mosaic of Iraq and the Levant, just as it had been in the decades of modern Syria and Iraq, and the Ottoman Empire before that. The IS's practices of governance, from its administration of irrigation and oil to its propagation of group cohesion, in many ways accord with those of previous state-building efforts in the region. Whatever its initial success, the IS proved unable to withstand assault by the international community and has seen its territorial footprint steadily erode.

The state in the Arab world, as Lisa Anderson notes in this volume, has always had a variety of competitors, including religious orders, multinational corporations, tribes, and mafias. The collapse of Arab states in 2011 allowed these contenders to assert new prerogatives in suddenly "ungoverned" space. Still, only the specific groups endowed with specific understandings of their histories demanded separation from the state. With the qualified exception of the IS, these movements reject particular states but embrace the model of statehood. They build upon the sedimented histories of their parent states, rejuvenating political communities whose claims to self-determination had been variously rejected or rebuffed. Those orphaned by 20th-century Wilsonianism still cling to its core values in the new millennium. Notions of self-determination and sovereignty are the inheritance of those who lived under Arab states, however unhappily. These norms continue to delimit and structure political contestation.

Ultimately, separatist movements must do what states do: assert control over resources and populations, render an effective social contract with their provisional citizens, and strive for a monopoly over the use of force. They must also gain favor with the international community, the US, Europe, Russia, as well as regional players such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. It is their exogenous decisions that will ultimately determine the structuring of statehood.

NOTES

¹Philip G. Roeder, *Where Nation-States Come From: Institutional Change in the Age of Nationalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 208. See also Benjamin Smith, "Separatist Conflict in the Former Soviet Union and Beyond: How Different Was Communism?," *World Politics* 65 (2013): 350–81.

²Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 3–5; Iliya F. Harik, "The Ethnic Revolution and Political Integration in the Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3 (1972): 303–23.

³Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 1996).

⁴Boaz Atzili, *Good Fences, Bad Neighbors: Border Fixity and International Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Ian S. Lustick, "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political 'Backwardness' in Historical Perspective," *International Organization* 51 (1997): 653–83; Sean Yom, *From Resilience to Revolution: How Foreign Interventions Destabilize the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Rolf Schwarz, *War and State Building in the Middle East* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2012).

⁵Lisa Anderson, "Demystifying the Arab Spring: Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya," *Foreign Affairs* 90 (2011): 2–7; Louise Fawcett, "States and Sovereignty in the Middle East: Myths and Realities," *International Affairs* 93 (2017): 789–807; Ariel I. Ahram, "Territory, Sovereignty, and New Statehood in the Middle East and North Africa," *The Middle East Journal* 71 (2017): 345–62.

⁶Lisa Blaydes, "State Building in the Middle East," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 487–504.

⁷Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁸Vittoria Federico, "The Rise of Rojava: Kurdish Autonomy in the Syrian Conflict," *SAIS Review* 35 (2015): 81–90.

⁹Sean Kane, "Al-Barqa Reborn? Eastern Regionalism and Libya Political Transition," in *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, ed. Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁰Harris Mylonas and Ariel Ahram, "De Facto States Unbound," *PONARS Eurasia*, Policy Memo No. 374 (2015), accessed 17 December 2017, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm374_Mylonas-Ahram_August2015_0.pdf; Ali N. Hamdan, "'Breaker of Barriers?': Notes on the Geopolitics of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham," *Geopolitics* 21 (2016): 605–27.

¹¹William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: Macmillan, 2015), 21.