The Government of War

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doi:10.1017/S002074381400110X

I write this piece as Iraq, following Syria, descends into a civil war that is undermining the post–World War I state system and reconfiguring regional and transnational networks of mobilization and instrumentalizations of violence and identity formation. That the Middle East has come to this moment is not an inevitable product of the artificiality of national borders and the precariousness of the state system. It is important to avoid this linear narrative of inevitability, with its attendant formulations of the Middle East as a repository of a large number of absences, and instead to locate the current wars in a specific historical time: the late and post–Cold War eras, marked by the agendas of the Washington Consensus and the globalization of neoliberal discourses; the privatization of the developmental and welfare state; the institutional devolution and multiplication of security services; and the entrenchment of new forms of colonial violence and rule in Israel and Palestine and on a global scale. The conveners of this roundtable have asked us to reflect on the technopolitics of war in the context of this particular moment and in light of the pervasiveness of new governmentalities of war. What I will do in this short piece is reflect on the heuristic and methodological possibilities of the study of war as a form of governance, or what I call the "government of war," in light of my own research and writing on Iraq.

Untangling the problematic of the state is critical to all scholarly endeavors to make war and its violence legible. The enterprise is by its very nature an interdisciplinary one, even as certain disciplines pose the state question differently than do others. For political scientists and historical sociologists, a critical question has been the extent to which war has contributed to building or weakening state capacities. Some have explored the interplay between external and internal groups and networks and the maintenance of certain forms of regional and national alliances and controls.[1] When the problematic of the state does not take center stage in the analyses of political scientists who study civil war and genocide, the state's disintegration or role among many other actors forms the background. These analyses have focused on the rationality of forms of violence and the motivation that undergirds the mobilization of certain constituencies in supporting warring groups.[2] In most of this literature, however, the assumption is that war has a beginning and an end, and that it takes place within national boundaries in which actors make strategic or moral choices.

The past two decades have seen the erosion of the conception of war as bounded and temporally limited. It is being supplanted by an understanding of war as not only forever but also "everywhere," as Derek Gregory has pointed out.[3] Scholars have produced a body of work addressing the fragmentation of national sovereignty and the spatialization and reterritorialization of new forms of war making. They have pointed to overlapping and often conflicting legal regimes and their subversion, particularly in the wake of 11 September 2001. Anthropologists and cultural critics have explored new forms of

subject formation and citizenship created by wars: civil, colonial, and global.[4] Less well developed, with the notable exception of scholarship on Israel/Palestine, is a systematic analysis of the implication of these changes in forms of war making for the deployment of state power and for the state's sponsorship of institutions and organizations that produce certain kinds of expertise. The latter include military, organizational, territorial, and many other types of knowledge focused on the control, deployment, and care of populations during wartime, where the rules of war are continuously shifting and overlapping.[5] Equally critical and closely tied to our understanding of state power during wartime is the process of rendering the vulnerability of populations to war's violence part of the everyday. In other words, how does one conceptualize and write about the paradox of normalization as a mode of organizing both state power and social life while accounting for their perpetual disruption?

I came to this question while attempting to write the social history of the politics of war in Iraq, a country whose population has since 1980 lived through a national war, counterinsurgencies, ethnic cleansing, and a colonial occupation followed by insurgency and civil war.[6] Drawing on the archives of the Baʿth Party and interviews with soldiers who fought in the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) and the First Gulf War (1990–91), I found that the paradox of normalization lay in the tension between the modes of abstraction of state power and the messiness and violence of its bureaucratic practices on the ground. This messiness was engendered by acts of resistance, by processes of claim making framed within the languages of the rights of and obligations to vulnerable populations, and by attempts to govern insurgent or potentially "problematic" categories of people. The government of war in Iraq after 1980 was and continues to be a precarious and changing undertaking but one that has profoundly altered the parameters of the deployment of state power, the organization of social life, and the language of claim making that various Iraqi citizens make about themselves and their rights.

Let me turn briefly to these questions to ground my rather abstract formulation in the empirical and conclude by raising a few unresolved conceptual issues that emerged from my research. The normalization of wartime conditions in Iraq transformed a developmental and welfare state with specific kinds of rationality and population targets into a national security and counterinsurgency state. Despite the state's abstract formulation of its policies in the language of national security and sovereignty, the rationality of governance during wartime was developed to deal with specific and perennial problems of population control, including the management of death and care, mobilization, desertion, insurgency, social "problems" brought on by the threat to the patriarchal family order by absent husbands, social delinquency created by wartime conditions, informal and underground networks of an economy to resist the war, and the designation of territories in the north and south of the country as spaces of exception to counter territorial losses to Iran and insurgents.

Thus, certain categories of people (soldiers, deserters, insurgents, martyrs' families, prisoners of war, widows, orphans, war disabled) became the target of control, discipline, and care by the bureaucracies of the state. During the eight years of war with Iran, bureaucracies of control and care (Baʿth Party martyrs' organizations, new security services, women's and peasants' organizations, the veterans' organizations, organizations of the war disabled, medical institutions that developed the science of prosthetics) dealt with problematic spheres of activity generated by the war. Many of the state's attempts

to deal with these problems were undergirded by a restructuring of the juridical and legal language and apparatus that reshaped the rights of citizens and created increasingly complex and differentiated categories of inclusion and exclusion. This is clear in the changing set of rights of martyrs' families and the claims they make to these rights. Martyrdom and its contested administrative, legal, and representational meanings became and remain the terrain on which articulations of citizenship and subjecthood play themselves out.[7]

Iraq provides the tragic testing ground for the governmentality of war in the late and post–Cold War periods. But its example can allow us to think critically about the heuristic possibilities of the concept of war as a rationality of governance to explain the social during periods of perpetual crisis and disruption of state power.

Two conceptual problems emerge from the deployment of this state-centered governmentality to explain the everyday of perpetual war. The first is the problem of graduated, overlapping, and often conflicting sovereignties between the state and various corporate entities (e.g., private and/or insurgent militaries) as well as international organizations that have different technologies of control and deploy differing conceptions of rights. The second problem is one that scholars undertaking ethnographic work are addressing: how to write the history of normalization with and against the archive to help us understand the interplay between the aspirations of governmentality and its workings on the ground.

NOTES

[1]For a discussion of some of these approaches, see Daniel Neep, "War, State Formation, and Culture," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2013): 795–97. See also Michael Barnett, *Confronting the Costs of War: Military Power, State, and Society in Egypt and Israel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Steven Heydemann, ed., *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000). For a more systematic engagement with the effects of expertise, bureaucracies, and industries of war on the nature of state power, see David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain 1920–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[2]Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Elizabeth Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008). I thank Julia Choucair Vizoco for recommending these books.

[3]Derek Gregory, "The Everywhere War," *Geographical Journal* 177 (2011): 238–50; Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

[4]See the roundtable "Theorizing Violence," in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2013): 791–812.

[5]Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society and the Military* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005); Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009); and Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (New York: Verso Press, 2007).

[6]Dina Rizk Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). I am indebted to the work of Foucault, Timothy Mitchell, and their various interlocutors who have attempted to use and reformulate the concept of governmentality to write about war as politics and the politics of war. They are too numerous to list in this short essay.

[7]Achille Mbembe has characterized this as "necropolitics," or the "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death." See Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meinjtes, *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 11–40.