

Introduction

Crossing a street in Dahiyeh, a suburb of Beirut in the summer of 2015 should have been simple. It was Ramadan 1436 and the streets were adorned with colour to go with images of Hassan Nasrallah, Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei. Destroyed in 2006 after the thirty-four-day war with Israel, Dahiyeh has since been rebuilt in a way that reflects the area's Shi'a, Arab roots, rather than the European influences that help define other parts of Beirut.

Taking all of this in, I failed to notice the SUV that had turned off Ayatollah Khomeini Street, but I was quickly aware of the men who jumped out of it, shouting at me in Arabic and Spanish, somewhat bizarrely: Who was I? What was I doing there? Who did I work for? Shortly thereafter, I was left to go on my way, heading back to the safety of my hotel. A couple of metres towards my destination, another car screeched to a halt and three policemen got out. Again, the questions came and the trepidation built.

Speaking with the police, it transpired that they had been asked to find out who I was by people who regulated life across that part of town: Hizballah. Cameras had been installed across Dahiyeh out of fear that there would be an attack and there was a liaison agreement in place between the Lebanese state police and Hizballah concerning security in that part of Beirut and power lay with the latter. After answering a few questions, I was once again free to go. This time, I took a taxi back to my hotel in Hamra, where I remained for the afternoon. On 12 November 2015, less than four months after my visit, a devastating suicide attack killed 43 people and injured a further 200. The attack was claimed by Da'ish.

My experiences in Beirut provided a first-hand account of how sovereign power in Lebanon is contested. Hizballah is often referred to as a 'state within a state', but in this case the *quasi* state was collaborating with formal state institutions to maintain its security. For a state that had endured a fifteen-year long civil war in the not too distant past, such collaboration appeared promising. Yet the Party of God's involvement in the Syrian war in support of the embattled President, Bashar Al Assad, proved deeply unpopular back home, increasing fears of a retreat back into sectarian violence.

Lebanese politics has long been characterised by religious difference that is built into the very fabric of the state, embedded in a constitution that shares power along sectarian lines. This organisation of political life has left the state open to the geopolitical aspirations of others, leading to the penetration of Lebanese politics by Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and others, resulting in the conflation of domestic and regional politics. Regulating life, a key part of a sovereign's responsibilities, becomes increasingly difficult in such contexts, where the spread of identities and religious groups provides opportunities for a range of actors to wield influence and highlights the fragility of states across the region. It is this struggle to regulate life amid instances of contested sovereignty across the Middle East that is the main focus of this book.

A growing body of work quickly emerged in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, the spate of protests that cut across the Middle East in early 2011. The literature on the uprisings spans a range of different theoretical, ontological and epistemological positions, raising a number of important questions about the hows, whys and whens of the recent past. While each set of protests was driven by the theme of human dignity and greater political access, demands were shaped by local context. Economic concerns, contested ruling bargains, seemingly endemic corruption and deepening ties between regimes and Western states all increased anger and discontentment among peoples, but with particular grievances serving to mobilise people. In spite of this contextual difference, the target of the protesters' ire was largely the same: the state. With this in mind, to understand the onset of the Arab Uprisings, we must begin by exploring ideas of sovereignty and political organisation in the form of the state.

While a great deal of work has focused upon questions of (in)security, a growing body of literature across a range of disciplines questions the centrality of *the state* and the role of *religion* within political life. It is here where I situate this book, albeit with a slightly different focus. The role of the state in the contemporary Middle East has long been contested, from the suggestion that its importance as a form of political organisation has been imposed or overstated, to the Realist position that places the state as central to all of political life.

A growing body of literature emerges that talks about the (re)emergence of the 'weak' Arab state amid myriad challenges to its sovereignty, from both above and below. As Bassel Salloukh has noted, the overlapping of domestic, transnational and geopolitical factors has created a scenario where as states consolidated, they not only had to balance against material threats but also against ideational threats. Such overlapping had been commonplace during the 1950s and 1960s but following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, the regional landscape took on many of those characteristics.¹ In the years after the Arab Uprisings, such pressures increased as states became increasingly unable to address – and balance – the competing pressures, fragmenting and creating opportunities for others to interfere within their borders.

Geopolitical struggles for Syria, Yemen and Iraq pitted regional and international powers against each other, with a devastating impact on local politics penetrated by actors and their allies. This transformation was fuelled by increasingly vitriolic difference that took on new meaning with the emergence of a geopolitical struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran that conflated regime interest with religious identity.²

It is easy to reduce the contemporary Middle East to a struggle between Sunni actors led by Saudi Arabia and Shi'a actors led by Iran, but the region is far more complex than this,³ where local identities interact with national, ethnic and religious denominations, while underpinned by class and ideology. Moreover, we must be careful not to deny local agency within the environment of this regional struggle. Instead, as we shall see, space is shaped by the complex interaction of regional and local actors, meaning that domestic political wrangling takes place within the context of geopolitical struggles between actors whose networks transcend state borders, often underpinned by shared religious values.

With this in mind, it is important to consider the role of religion within society, which raises a number of important philosophical and practical considerations. Scholars as far back as Ibn Khaldun have focused upon the social power of religion, which, as the twentieth century developed, became increasingly important. At the turn of the century, religion was largely seen as a private matter, yet in the postcolonial period, a number of regimes used the legitimising ideologies of religion to support their claims to self-determination. Religion took on an increasing *political* importance, leading to the emergence of competition between the nationalist movements of pan-Arabists who advocated the supremacy of the state and the Islamists who argued that sovereignty was found in God.

This religious revival challenged the fragile relationship between peoples and their nascent national projects, also serving as an outlet for political dissent. This struggle would be at the heart of political life in the years that followed. Yet this was not a singular struggle between those advocating the sovereignty of the state and those espousing the sovereignty of God, but complicated by a range of often competing interpretations about the role of Islam within political life.

Islamists, broadly speaking, believe that Islam and Islamic values should play a central role within public life. Although a broad phenomenon, we can view Islamists as those who hold that their faith provides strong political and legal guidelines beyond the moral code adhered to by all Muslims. Becoming an Islamist is a conscious act, affirming membership to a particular ideology. It is not just a response to modernity but it is also a product of it. The basic premise of Islamist movements is to locate Islam and its moral and legal codes with the fabric of the nation state. What that looks like in practice is a consequence of context and contingency, determined by the socio-economic politics of the state and the power of the group itself. As such, Islamists in Iran, Gaza, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia have vastly different visions of the relationship between Islam and the state, shaped by context and contingency. Difference is a consequence of the interaction of various factors that are context specific, such as class, nationality and ethnicity alongside the individual – and community's – interpretation of Islam, and right to do so.

Some Islamists also possess cross-border networks and aspirations, challenging political organisation across the Middle East in the process. Although groups including the Muslim Brotherhood (and its affiliates) and Hizballah (and its networks) both operate across the region, they fall broadly within the rubric of the sovereign state's system and engage in electoral politics. Other groups who also fall within broad definitions of

Islamism include those who conduct what they hold to be religiously sanctioned warfare as a consequence of their obligations. Even those who carry out such acts range from those with a fundamentalist Salafi vision to the Sufis, via those who lack a classical Islamic education.

Perhaps the most obvious point of tension, however, is the emergence of politically, economically and socially charged sectarian difference across and within spatial borders. The struggle between Sunni and Shi'a communities is politically charged, fusing faith with political identities and geopolitical aspirations. Competing views of sectarian difference exist, from the primordialist who reduces difference to faith, to the constructivist who views identities as constructed phenomena. Yet this is not purely an academic debate. Speaking in 2013, President Obama referred to 'ancient hatreds' in explaining the underlying reasons for the Syrian conflict, ignoring the lack of political space and the increasing barbarism of the regime.

Writing in 2015, Naser Ghobadzdeh and Shahram Akbarzadeh noted that,

Once othering becomes part of politico-religious discourse, it moves to all levels of society, transforming itself into as much a bottom-up as a top-down process. Over the course of time, othering rhetoric has expanded beyond theology to become a decisive part of political, social, religious and economic reality.⁴

Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeh's point is astute. The politicisation of sectarian difference has given such identities almost existential importance within – and across – territorial borders, resulting in not only top-down but bottom-up constructions of othering, shaped by context-specific contingent factors. Put another way, the factors that shape sectarian difference are radically different in Lebanon than they are in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan or Saudi Arabia. In each of these states, local historiographies give particular meaning to communal groups – shaped by social, political and economic contexts – which can result in distinct manifestations of difference when interacting with sectarian meta-narratives. There is, of course, a marked difference between the two sects and people who bear those identities, but there is nothing inherently violent about such difference. Instead, sectarian difference appears to be an inescapable phenomenon that *ignites* amid socio-political upheaval, uncertainty and fear, finding traction amid fragmentation.

As Fanar Haddad observes, the concept of sectarianism appears to be merely a *slogan*, deriving meaning in the eye of the beholder. In a powerful piece that documents the use of over a hundred scholarly sources on the subject of sectarianism, Haddad argues that the concept 'lacks and eludes definition', giving it an amorphous quality that allows it to be used almost indiscriminately to label anything related to sect identity.⁵ A great deal of this scholarly literature seeks to define the concept, although a large body of literature follows Haddad's lead and chooses not to define a concept that has become too politicised and emotionally charged to possess analytic clarity. Locating myself in this camp, I follow Haddad by deploying the term *sectarian* with an adjoining word when necessary but aiming for the greatest level of precision and analytic clarity as possible.

A deeper problem of latent Orientalism within Western analysis of the Middle East adds to these problems. As Geneive Abdo observes, Western analysis is beset by two

serious problems. The first is a ‘flagrant tendency’ to dismiss the abiding importance of religion. The second is the continued desire to view the nation-state model as the ‘proper vehicle’ of political organisation.⁶ Both views emerge from post-Enlightenment European history, ignoring the local historiographies of the region and projecting norms on to a region with its own unique normative and cultural history. Such issues, both philosophical and empirical, are prevalent across a great deal of the literature written in the recent past. In times of crisis and uncertainty, political landscapes and social contracts are redrawn. The toppling of a number of Arab leaders in the aftermath of the popular protests in 2011 prompted a burgeoning literature detailing the events and the violence that swiftly followed.⁷ Yet very little work has been undertaken placing the protests within the context of political dissent and contestation across the Middle East in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In George Orwell’s magnum opus *1984*, the Party slogan, ‘Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past,’ seeks to restrict agency. Such comments also evoke memories of Walter Benjamin, who noted that history is written by the victors. History is important. History provides a narrative that justifies action, which supports claims to legitimacy and, ultimately, power. Often this involves attempts to rewrite history, such as the order given by the Egyptian President Gamal Abd Al Nasser to destroy all evidence of Egypt’s military activity in Yemen.

Political projects are amorphous entities, constructed and shaped through the interaction of countless actors and social forces. Understanding the emergence of political projects and the sovereign claims that underpin them requires an exploration of the processes of state building. Such mechanisms have rarely proved inclusive; instead, they have typically been inherently exclusionary, leading to people struggling for basic needs. Complicated by the precariousness of modernity, the struggle for certainty pushes people to a range of different identities and ideologies in search for meaning. Amid such factors, regimes seek to maintain power, using a range of logics of governmentality to do so. To understand such techniques, I draw on the work of a number of scholars including Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Achille Mbembe, Khaldun, Robert Cover and Peter Berger, whose work allows for rigorous exploration of the relationship between rulers and ruled and the construction of political projects.⁸

In order to achieve this task, it is necessary, at times, to paint with a broad brush, meaning that a number of important incidents are either covered briefly or not at all. This is not a reflection of the importance of such events but rather, the need to be selective in the examples considered to facilitate analysis of events across the region. I have deployed a broad but implicit comparative framework where I select events not only based on similarity but also difference to provide a region-wide analysis of events. Although the Arab Uprisings were triggered by the actions of a Tunisian street vendor, this book does not engage with events in North Africa, for reasons of scope and analytical clarity.

In support of this, I draw upon fieldwork conducted across the Middle East between 2011 and 2018, along with interviews conducted with a range of people via phone, Skype and email from a range of groups in an effort to understand their relationship with

political structures. All names have been removed to maintain anonymity and after a number of worrying events, locations have also been removed in an attempt to ensure safety. This empirical material is supported by tweets, diplomatic cables (released by WikiLeaks), speeches, constitutions and secondary literature in English, Arabic and Persian. I also draw upon material from my time as specialist advisor to the House of Lords International Relations Committee, which produced a report on the UK's relationship with the Middle East entitled *Time for a New Realism*. In this role I was involved in selecting expert witnesses and writing questions for witness sessions. The committee drew expert testimony from ambassadors, civil society leaders, academics, policymakers, and a round table of 'young people'. I have not included any confidential material or referred to private sessions of the committee.

At times, this book seeks to offer a historiography of claims to sovereignty, yet it should not be read solely as such. Nor should it be taken as purely a work of political theory. Instead, I seek to combine the two to offer an approach to understanding the contemporary Middle East that uses political theory to deconstruct claims to sovereignty. In doing this, I hope to explore the claims and mechanisms through which life is regulated. Central to this are the following questions:

- What are the roots of sovereign power and what are the logics of governmentality that support it?
- When, how and why is sovereign power contested?
- What implications does the fragmentation of sovereign power have on the ordering of space across the Middle East?

With this in mind, the book is split across eight chapters. Chapter 1 engages with debates about sovereignty in the contemporary Middle East, interrogating ideas of *space* and *nomos* in the process of suggesting that amid shared normative environments, what happens within the borders of one state can have repercussions beyond the state. Chapter 2 offers a genealogy of states across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, focusing upon the establishment of states amid competing pressures of decolonisation, pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism and nationalism. It then considers how political projects exist and operate amid regional and international pressures such as the War on Terror and the Arab Uprisings.

Chapter 3 explores the development of political structures and the means through which regimes exert sovereign power, through cultivating the ban, exclusion and eviscerating political meaning from life. Chapter 4 engages with the role of religion within political life and sovereign projects broadly. It interrogates a key source of sovereign tension and the space of possibility that emerges as a consequence. Chapter 5 looks at the urban environment. With a large majority of the region's population living in cities, urban landscapes become a prominent arena through which politics plays out.

Chapter 6 explores the Arab Uprisings, placing them in historical context and suggesting that they are the latest manifestation of long-standing grievances that have emerged as a fundamental consequence of building political projects. Chapter 7 looks at regime responses to the Arab Uprisings, ranging from reform and the stripping of

meaning from political life to the emergence of war machines. Such variety reveals the multifarious stresses and pressures on regimes seeking to maintain power amid an array of societal pressures. Chapter 8 locates the domestic repercussions of the Arab Uprisings and their aftermath within broader Middle Eastern geopolitical and normative environments.

Central to all chapters is a focus upon the role of agency. The uprisings were triggered by the actions of a single individual whose act of resistance inspired the region-wide contestation of sovereign power. In the face of biopolitics and necropolitics, the power of agency appears limited, yet we should never underestimate the ability of one person or one idea to facilitate change. Fundamentally, the book argues that the Arab Uprisings were (the latest) manifestations of sovereign contestation that can be traced across state-building projects in the Middle East.

Notes

- 1 Bassel Salloukh, 'Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State' (POMEPS, 12.08.15), available at https://pomeps.org/2015/08/12/overlapping-contests-and-middle-east-international-relations-the-return-of-the-weak-arab-state/#_edn13 (accessed 18.08.15).
- 2 Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).
- 3 Curtis Ryan, 'The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria', *Middle East Report*, 42 (2012), 262, available at www.merip.org/mer/mer262/new-arab-cold-war-struggle-syria (accessed 06.01.03).
- 4 Naser Ghobadzadeh and Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'Sectarianism and the Prevalence of "Othering" in Islamic Thought', *Third World Quarterly*, 36 (2016), 700.
- 5 Fanar Haddad, '"Sectarianism" and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East', *Middle East Journal*, 71:3 (2017), 363.
- 6 Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 9.
- 7 See Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012); Tariq Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Mehran Kamrava, *Inside the Arab State* (London: Hurst, 2018); Yassin Al Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (London: Hurst, 2017); Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Zed, 2012); Asef Bayat, *Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (London: Hurst, 2014); Christopher Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Rise and Coming Fall of the Arab Gulf Monarchies* (London: Hurst, 2012); Nimer Sultany, *Law and Revolution: Legitimacy and Constitutionalism After the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (eds), *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2017); André Bank, Thomas Richter and Anna

Sunik, 'Durable, Yet Different: Monarchies in the Arab Spring,' *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 4:2 (2014), 163–79; Asef Bayat, 'Arab Revolutions and the Study of Middle Eastern Societies,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 43:3 (2011), 386; Eva Bellin, 'Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring,' *Comparative Politics*, 44:2 (2012), 127–49; Nathan Brown, 'Remembering Our Roots,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 43:3 (2011), 388; Francesco Cavatorta, 'No Democratic Change ... and Yet No Authoritarian Continuity: The Inter-Paradigm Debate and North Africa After the Uprisings,' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42:1 (2014), 1–11; Vincent Durac, 'Protest Movements and Political Change: An Analysis of the "Arab Uprisings" of 2011,' *Journal of Contemporary African Affairs*, 31:2 (2013), 175–93; Tamirace Fakhoury, 'Do Power-Sharing Systems Behave Differently Amid Regional Uprisings? Lebanon in the Arab Protest Wave,' *Middle East Journal*, 68:4 (2014), 505–20; F. Gregory Gause III, 'Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability,' *Foreign Affairs*, 90:4 (2011), 81–90; Shadi Hamid, 'The Rise of the Islamists: How Islamists Will Change Politics, and Vice Versa,' *Foreign Affairs*, 90:3 (2011), 40–7; Sari Hanafi, 'The Arab Revolutions: The Emergence of a New Political Subjectivity,' *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 5:2 (2012), 198–213; Adam Hanieh, 'Shifting Priorities or Business as Usual? Continuity and Change in the Post-2011 IMF and World Bank Engagement with Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt,' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42:1 (2014): 1–16; Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Historical Sociology and the Arab Uprising,' *Mediterranean Politics*, 19:1 (2014), 137–40; Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Syria: From "Authoritarian Upgrading" to Revolution?,' *International Affairs*, 88:1 (2012), 95–113; Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Change and Continuity After the Arab Uprising: The Consequences of State Formation in Arab North African States,' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42:1 (2014): 1–19.

- 8 Although incredibly powerful, the ideas of these scholars have only sparingly been applied to the Middle East and, when they have, they typically take place looking at specific issues rather than a broader engagement with political life and sovereign power more generally. This reveals a desire to focus upon particular manifestations of *the camp* – a key theme in Agamben's work – rather than a broader exploration of the camp as the hidden paradigm of modernity. For example, Agamben's work has been used to explore refugee camps in Palestine and Lebanon – spaces of exception – but has not yet been applied more broadly while Mbembe's work has been used to explore life in Palestine. See for example: Adam Ramadan 'Destroying Nahr el-Bared: Sovereignty and Urbicide in the Space of Exception,' *Political Geography* 28:3 (2009), 153–63; Sara Fregonese, 'The Urbicide of Beirut? Geopolitics and the Built Environment in the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1976),' *Political Geography*, 28:5 (2009), 309–18; and Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: The Architecture of Israel's Occupation* (New York: Verso, 2012), among others. Although questions about the use of such a plurality of theoretical positions are legitimate, these authors are broadly interested in the same type of questions and Agamben, Arendt, Mbembe, Deleuze and Guattari all work from the same ontological position.