

The regime fights back

The regime in Egypt is waging war against the young who dare to dream of a bright future for themselves and their country. Somewhere there are still peoples and herds, but not with us, my brothers: here there are states. A state? What is that? Well! Open now your ears to me, for now will I say to you my word concerning the death of peoples. State is the name of the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly lies it also; and this lie creeps from its mouth: 'I, the state, am the people.'

Family of Alaa Abd el-Fattah, detained in June 2015

On 3 July 2013, the Egyptian army engineered a *coup d'état* against Mohammad Morsi, the region's first democratically elected Islamist President.¹ Following a spate of protests that culminated in an estimated twenty million people taking to the streets of Egypt to voice their displeasure at Morsi's 'ordinary' transition,² the army forced the Freedom and Justice Party from power. On 14 August, some four weeks after Morsi's government was toppled, over eight hundred supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood were killed near the Rabaa al-Adawiya mosque in Cairo in what Human Rights Watch called a likely 'crime against humanity'.³ It was in Rabaa where Egypt's revolutionary dream died.

Over the course of twelve hours, Egyptian security personnel used a range of tactics and weapons including bulldozers and supported by snipers, security personnel entered the square to disperse protesters to devastating effect. Yet the Rabaa massacre was not an isolated incident. Shortly afterwards, protesters were dispersed from al-Nahda in a similar manner, while further Brotherhood protests were also ended with violence.

The Human Rights Watch investigation into events in Rabaa documents a systematic attack against 'unarmed persons on political grounds', where lethal force was used indiscriminately.⁴ Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, referred to it as one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history, a violent crackdown planned 'at the highest levels of the Egyptian

government'.⁵ The report names Abdul Fatal Al Sisi, the Egyptian President, as one of the individuals complicit in events.

In the weeks that followed, some of the remaining members of the Brotherhood fled to London, Doha and Istanbul, while others were imprisoned or killed; over the course of the following year, over 2,500 civilians were killed and 17,000 injured,⁶ while 40,000 were arrested.⁷ The following year, an Egyptian court sentenced 529 Muslim Brothers to death and, a year later, Mohammad Morsi also received a death sentence in a systematic repression of the *ikhwan* – both party and ideology – driven by domestic and regional concerns, driven by the concerns of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁸ Morsi later died in an Egyptian court.

In Bahrain, where regional concerns were equally prevalent, the regime's response framed protestors as fifth columnists doing the nefarious bidding of Iran, resulting in the widespread restriction of political space across the island. In this climate, opposition groups and a number of journalists were imprisoned and in a number of instances, killed. The case of Eman Salehi, a Bahraini sports journalist who was killed by a member of the royal family reveals a great deal about the political climate in Bahrain.⁹ The Salehi case also evokes memories of Agamben's *homo sacer*, the individual who can be killed with impunity, revealing the potentiality at the heart of political projects; at the time of writing, her killer remains free.

In contrast to Egypt and Bahrain, events in Syria and Yemen erupted in violent conflict, pitting protest movements against regimes in ferocious fighting that rapidly consumed political dynamics across each state. Following the fragmentation of political organisation, ferocious hostilities began to shape life across the two states as local grievances interacted with national events, which all took place within a struggle for supremacy across the Middle East. As existential fear began to take hold, politics began to play out in what the Syrian intellectual Yassin Al Haj Saleh has termed a 'state of nature'. Evoking the work of Thomas Hobbes, Al Haj Saleh's description of events in Syria bear a number of hallmarks with those in Yemen as politics became characterised by 'social dispersion, direct reactive responses, violence – all characteristics of a society losing its self-control and its ability to act uniformly'.¹⁰

Al Haj Saleh's portrayal of the state of nature is perhaps bleaker than Hobbes', suggesting that there is a 'natural' transformation into this state of nature as a consequence of the increasingly repressive and sect-based politics of survival that challenge the very existence of the Syrian people. This approach stems from regimes following their instincts, their neuroses and 'their madness'. In such conditions, groups develop narratives of superiority and victimhood as a means of ensuring their survival. As a consequence, politics is reduced to a 'sectarian war, in which murder leads to murder, *asabiyyah* activates *asabiyyah*, and hatred animates hatred'.¹¹

The events of early 2011 that eviscerated regime–society relations across the Middle East were a widespread rejection of the political, economic, social and legal status quo, pushing people into localised forms of *asabiyyah* and challenging the relationship between *ordnung* and *ortung* in the process. Having had political meaning stripped from their lives and the regulation of this limited form of existence embedded within the fabric of the state, protests were an expression of agency in the face of seemingly insurmountable structures. Contestation was met with a fierce response from the

governance structures of the state as regimes attempted to regain control over the situation, using a range of draconian strategies. The rejection of 'being thus', in turn, created a situation wherein both regime and peoples sought to define the ordering of political life and, as a consequence, the very limits of political space. This process of contestation resulted in the emergence of war machines and a struggle to exert control over them.

Regime responses to the protests emerged from state-building processes, which facilitated the widespread repression that followed the uprisings. Although a number of regimes created bare life in an attempt to end the protest movements, this was not always successful. Instead, because of the existence of strong normative currents across the region, further mechanisms of control were deemed necessary. This chapter traces regime responses in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, beginning with the declaration of emergency powers before moving to consideration of securitising moves – the linguistic framing of particular issues as threats – which once again demonstrates the conflation of domestic and regional factors. It argues that regional affairs had a profound impact on regime responses to protest movements, while in turn, regime responses had regional repercussions.

States (and spaces) of emergency and exception

As protesters took to the streets in early 2011, political organisation was renegotiated amid the reconceptualisation of protest and resistance. This biopolitical machinery helped regimes control life, stripping it of political meaning but when this was deemed insufficient, sovereign power was exerted by controlling life through death. Regimes quickly declared states of emergency, suspending political structures and the rule of law as a consequence of perceived existential threats to their rule. Recourse to such methods was hardly surprising, yet as the repeal of emergency legislation was a prominent feature of protestor's demands, such action only served to escalate tensions. Once again, the state of exception had become the paradigm of government, the new norm.

The historical use of emergency legislation across the Middle East set a precedent for constitutional powers to be used in times of domestic unrest, embedding potentiality within the fabric of political organisation. Yet with the onset of the uprisings, regimes derogated from legal responsibilities to ensure their survival. The uprisings had a seismic impact upon regional dynamics as millions of people were displaced from their homes amid widespread instability and violence across the region. Widespread migration both within and between states impacted not only on state infrastructures but also their economies, as refugee populations were comprised of large numbers of professionals and highly qualified workers. The flow of people across state borders placed huge strains upon host countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, while also having a serious impact upon the construction of societies and their very survival.

These actions occurred in space that quickly took on new political meaning, opening up new sites for regulation.¹² While sites of opportunity, they were also sites

of the mundane, where the theatre of the spectacle was also the everyday landscape of life's routines, making the evolution of space more powerful. Amid contested societies and environments, public spaces became the battleground. Across the region, people articulating political messages occupied public spaces where they were quickly met with counter-narratives, protests and often, the security mechanisms of the state. As Mona El-Ghobashy suggests, 'the streets had become parliaments, negotiating tables and battlegrounds rolled into one'.¹³ Public space quickly became a zone of indistinction: a site of contestation and exception, where regime and opposition discourses clashed, while repressive force was a mechanism of control.

The uprisings triggered a fundamental shift in the way of *doing* politics. Beyond the mobilisation and direct action seen in the squares of the region, politics became a topic that was readily discussed as the shackles of authoritarian restrictions were thrown off. Debate about political life was everywhere but with such debate came divisions. As securitising moves took place, political divisions both online and in person between family and friends became increasingly heated, resulting in ostracisation and separation.¹⁴ It was a time of uncertainty for regimes and peoples, but it was a time when regimes fought back.

Derogation from constitutional clauses and establishment of emergency powers gave regimes seemingly unlimited power to respond to protest movements in whatever way was deemed necessary. Although a number of constitutions possessed clauses that limited the time under which emergency legislation could be imposed without review, such powers were rarely challenged.¹⁵ Through derogating from legal obligations, regimes were given power to respond to protests with violence, both direct and structural, destroying political space and reshaping the nature of societal dynamics. Such moves allowed for the repression of a range of different political and religious groups across the Middle East with regional repercussions.

Emergency laws were deeply unpopular and often cited by protestors as one of their main grievances. Perhaps the most prominent example of the draconian use of such laws was in Egypt. Although emergency laws in Egypt were lifted in the final days of the Mubarak regime – for the first time since 1980 – they were quickly reinstalled by the SCAF amid the uncertainty of post-revolutionary life. In response, rights organisations were vocal in their condemnation of the move. In response to Decree 193/2011, which not only revived the powers but also expanded their scope, an open letter was written that noted how the legislation highlighted the gulf between aspirations for democracy and the legacy of the old regime that continued to administer Egyptian affairs.¹⁶

Although Mohammad Morsi had promised to remove emergency laws, when faced with serious threats to his regime he derogated from the rule of law, returning to a paradigm of government that had become the all too common norm. In support of the sovereign decision, Morsi stated: 'I am against any emergency measures, but I have said that if I must stop bloodshed and protect the people then I will act'.¹⁷

After the *coup d'état* that deposed Morsi in the summer of 2013, Decree 136 permitted military personnel to stand by police forces to protect buildings.¹⁸ Such a decision was supported by the move to allow civilians to be tried in military courts, once

more depriving people of political rights.¹⁹ Two years on from the uprisings, concern at the behaviour of the security services remained, amid widespread corruption and endemic violence, with policemen remaining 'above the law and immunized from criminal accountability'.²⁰

In conditions of increasing uncertainty, it was argued that 'police continue to deploy excessive violence and torture systematically as it was during the Mubarak regime'.²¹ In the following years, the human rights situation worsened, amid 'massive and systematic violations of basic rights and freedoms despite starting the year with a promising new constitution'.²² The spectre of a terrorist threat in Sinai from a group that had declared allegiance to Da'ish only served to strengthen the Sisi regime's proclamations of the necessity of such legislation. This move also located Egypt within a Saudi-led coalition of Sunni states in the fight against terrorism, which had broader geopolitical repercussions beyond the fight against Da'ish, drawing on a burgeoning anti-Iranian sentiment along with cultivation about the Shi'a – and Persian – other.

In the early days of the uprisings in Syria, emergency laws were repealed in a token nod towards the protest movements. Imposed in 1963 to legislate for the prolix war with Israel the laws were used to support efforts to counter internal dissent, feeding into narratives that dissent was an attempt to emasculate the nation or collude with the enemy.²³ On 20 April 2011, Decree 161 lifted the emergency legislation, but the state of emergency was later replaced with Decree 54. Upon its implementation Mohammed Al Shaar, the Interior Minister, was explicit in his warnings to protestors stressing that they must 'refrain from taking part in all marches, demonstrations or sit-ins under any banner whatsoever'.²⁴

Amid unrest across the Bahrain, on 15 March 2011, the Al Khalifa declared a state of emergency in accordance with Article 36(b) of the Bahraini Constitution. Coming a day after GCC troops crossed the King Fahd causeway, emergency legislation was imposed to restrict political activity and support counter-revolutionary efforts, coupled with the use of military courts to try protestors. Three days later, Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh declared a thirty-day state of emergency, suspending the constitution. In Kuwait, regime efforts to regulate political life involved handing out prison sentences to those who stormed the parliament along with those who insulted the Emir.²⁵

In a similar move, Saudi Arabia sought to regulate political activity through recourse to counter-terror laws that restricted access to the Internet and freedom of speech.²⁶ Such efforts resulted in the establishment of new anti-terror legislation, which meant that acts of peaceful dissent could be defined as terrorist crimes. In addition to such manoeuvring, Riyadh employed other strategies to regulate political dissent and opposition. The Ministry for Culture and Information placed legal requirements on anyone wishing to blog to have a licence; those wishing to apply for a licence had to be in possession of a college degree and be over the age of twenty.²⁷

Another mechanism of control that became increasingly prominent at this time was the regulation of citizenship, where the politics of identity and ensuing revocation of citizenship rights from individuals became increasingly important in times of crisis.²⁸ Such a tactic has been routinely used across the Gulf, provoking not only

philosophical questions about the nature of citizenship, but also exploration of the legal mechanisms through which such strategies can be undertaken. As Zahra Bashar notes, the importance of historical and cultural dynamics has created a particular form of citizenship and stringent restrictions upon those who can claim nationality. With this in mind, after the uprisings, states across the Gulf amended legislation to allow for the removal of citizenship through recourse to either anti-terrorism legislation or nationality laws²⁹ and between 2011 and 2018, 738 Bahrainis had their citizenship revoked.³⁰ One former MP told me that he found out that he had lost his nationality while in London, via Al Jazeera.³¹

In such conditions, lives are deemed 'expendable' through the cultivation of bare life, through recourse to Law Number 58 of 2006 for Protecting Society from terrorism Acts and the Citizenship Law of 1963. In Bahrain it is illegal to be a stateless individual, a crime routinely punished under the Asylum and Immigration Law. As a consequence of their position in society, the stateless are unable to appeal against the charges as they possess no legal protection or ability to give lawyers power of attorney. The law denies individuals access to employment, marking them as migrant workers requiring sponsorship, along with the right to own property. It also denies health care and excludes children from formal education. By the summer of 2018, of the 738 individuals stripped of their citizenship, many remained in Bahrain as 'illegal residents', reduced to bare life: abandoned by the law yet bound to it.³²

Beyond physical space, protests also took place online, prompting regime efforts to regulate the Internet and arresting a number of individuals such as Nabeel Rajab, a Bahraini human rights activist, for criticising the Al Khalifa. While social media is often heralded as the means through which the uprisings took place, such a position denies local agency³³ and the widespread regulation of the Internet meant that some narratives were restricted. Supporting this position, Derek Gregory acknowledges that Westerners in positions of privilege tend to reduce political action in the Middle East to the digital repertoire, ignoring the importance of 'brave bodies in alliance installing new spaces'.³⁴

The uprisings demonstrated once more that space matters, highlighting the power of the street, of collective consciousness and the possibility of becoming, as the intimately tiny collided with hegemonic regional pressures. Yet the process of negotiating the uprisings – the clash between regimes and societies – reminded many that ownership of space had not been fully transformed from elites to publics. Efforts to demonstrate control through architecture continue as violence is embedded within urban structures. The erasure of symbolic sites was supplemented with an increasingly militarised regulatory force and an increase in symbolic violence. Across the Gulf, the presence of ruling families in public spaces, along highways and within hotels, increased in the aftermath of the protests; regime power was seemingly all encompassing.

Other efforts were undertaken to regulate life and manage images. News channels took on political meaning, where Al Jazeera was seen as the mouthpiece not only of Qatar but of the uprisings themselves. As the protests spread, regimes worked carefully to control and manipulate flows of information. A struggle quickly emerged

over music and literature: nationalist songs were played day and night in ministries and other public buildings while opposition groups sang modified versions of the same songs in the streets.³⁵ On state TV channels across Syria, prominent pro-regime religious leaders and intellectuals were interviewed, along with members of the public who were vocal in their praise for the President and military, while also baying ‘for the blood of the “terrorists”’.³⁶

The struggle to regulate space also includes intellectual debates. At the 2014 World Congress on Middle East Studies Conference in Ankara, those attending a panel on the politics of the UAE were met by a row of TV cameras and an armed security presence. Breaking with academic convention, the Chair introduced a Sheikha from the Emirates who proceeded to give a presentation on the merits of life in – and the politics of – the UAE. Again, breaking from the norm, the Chair refused to allow for questions and, in spite of a small amount of heckling from the floor, the session passed without further event. Although hardly remarkable in the grand scheme of Middle Eastern soft-power strategies, regime efforts to shape academic discourse have become increasingly prominent. The conference has routinely been a space of contestation. Four years earlier, the former Crown Prince of Jordan, Hassan bin Talal, publicly condemned a Malaysian journalist who had criticised the Hashemite kingdom, saying, in English, ‘Fuck you. People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.’

The regulation of physical borders became increasingly important.³⁷ Prominent journalists and academics, including a number of my own colleagues, were turned away from the states that they worked on and in, while others were also targeted, followed and hacked.³⁸ Urban landscapes became contested sites of political representation, a battleground within which actors embroiled in conflict express their views and attempt to garner support for people who witness such scenes.

News coverage of events beyond regional outlets has also taken on a political agenda. In the Syrian context, intellectual exploration has increasingly become populated by conspiracy theories and ideological agendas at the cost of rigorous empirically driven analysis.³⁹ This has helped to facilitate a position where the narrative that the secular Syrian regime is fighting Islamist extremists – as part of the War on Terror – is taken with little critical engagement. Ultimately, this creates a position that results in international inaction, policy confusion⁴⁰ and the death of thousands, justified within the global *nomos*.

The sectarianisation of political life

Amid the contestation of sovereign power, regimes have sought to ensure their survival by closing off a community against an outside, increasingly done along sect-based lines. Parallels can be drawn across the region as regimes sought to solidify their support bases by creating existential fears about the other. In such conditions, political life took on a sectarian dimension while also becoming imbued with geopolitical meaning. By framing opposition groups as an existential threat to the very survival of the *polis*, regimes not only strengthened their support bases internally and externally, but also framed their

responses as *necessary* to defend the state, speaking to domestic and international audiences in the process.⁴¹

The emergence of politically charged sectarian narratives reveals the spatial aspects at play in the relationship between politics and Islam, as domestic politics clash with the geopolitical aspirations of regional powers. By locating national events within (geo)sectarian narratives, regimes derive legitimacy and security from co-religious kin within their states and beyond in what has become known as *sectarianisation*, the *securitisation of sect-based difference*. As we shall see below, sectarianisation was a key weapon in the armoury of a number of regimes, opening up questions about the ordering of space in the process.

For Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, *sectarianisation* is

an active process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilisation of popular sentiments around particular identity markers. Class dynamics, fragile states, and geopolitical rivalries also shape the sectarianization process.⁴²

The thesis is underpinned by the prevalence of authoritarian rule, creating a crisis of legitimacy that requires the manipulation of sect-based identities as a means of ensuring regime survival. When placed in the context of geopolitical currents, most importantly the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, efforts to ensure survival draw upon – and feed into – regional security. Yet beyond this elite process, it also occurs in different guises as groups seek to close themselves off against an outside, exacerbating sectarian differences in the process.

Processes of sectarianisation seek to ensure survival by mobilising communities around a shared identity, framing the predetermined other as an existential threat. This framing has been a prominent feature of the state-building process, where loyalty is forged from a complex web of identities across the region. Amid the separation of regime and society in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, opportunities have emerged to ensure survival through the (re)shaping of space and ordering of life, driven by the interaction of regional forces with local actors.

Such processes refer to the cultivation and manipulation of seemingly violent divisions between – and within – groups by individuals with a vested interest in communal supremacy in pursuit of political or economic aims. Through these approaches, sect-based difference becomes a vehicle through which subjectivity, prejudice and politics gain traction. From this, grievances develop, and as political structures are put in place to regulate life such sentiments become both institutionalised and generational. As we have seen in Lebanon, Iraq, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran (among others), processes of state formation have regularly created antagonistic grievances between sectarian groups as a means of maintaining control and ultimately, survival.⁴³

In many cases, the survival of the state has been conflated with the survival of the regime and, as such, actors seek to frame particular issues as *existential threats* – those requiring extraordinary measures – in a process typically known as securitisation.

Securitisation seeks to understand how particular issues are moved from the realm of 'normal politics' and framed in such a way that 'justifies the use of extraordinary measures to handle them'.⁴⁴ These processes require the linguistic framing of events for particular audiences, which take place within domestic, regional and international contexts that support the move to extraordinary measures.⁴⁵

Securitising approaches take place within spaces shaped by the interaction of the global with the 'intimately tiny'. Regional politics provides context within which such moves take place, combined with the contingency of local factors, giving meaning to particular approaches that may differ in neighbouring states. To justify this suspension of rules and order, regimes speak to audiences to legitimise and frame their behaviour, yet the complexity of state building and identity construction finds traction among intended and unintended audiences.⁴⁶ Amid a shared normative environment, securitising moves have implications across the Middle East, taking place within and across spaces that are shaped by the interaction of the global with the local.

The context in which sectarianisation occurs is integral. While sectarianisation takes place *within* political projects, it also derives a great deal of traction from geopolitical contexts. In recent years, a key component of sectarianisation and securitisation processes is a fear about nefarious Iranian activity among Shi'a communities, perhaps most explicitly addressed in remarks about the Shi'a Crescent. Demonstrating the success of such framing, a commonly held view across the region is that Iran has sought to destabilise states as a means through which they can increase their influence, capitalising on moments of crisis to manipulate domestic populations whose loyalty has long been questioned.⁴⁷

To understand the contemporary roots of these processes we must return to Iraq after the 2003 invasion. Although most Arab regimes were apathetic to events in Iraq, Iranian forces capitalised on the vacuum that emerged after the fall of Saddam.⁴⁸ In the years that followed, Iranian agents began to exert influence across Iraq through Qassem Soleimani, the influential head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps.⁴⁹ Fearing Iranian gains, Saudi officials urged the United States not to 'leave Iraq until its sovereignty has been restored, otherwise it will be vulnerable to the Iranians'.⁵⁰ The King was a staunch critic of increasing Iranian expansionism, regularly urging US military action. One diplomatic cable recounts the King's exhortations to 'cut off the head of the snake', with a clear nod to the regime in Tehran.⁵¹ Moreover, Abdullah stressed that he had 'no confidence whatsoever in Maliki', proclaiming that he had no credibility. Moreover, Maliki was 'an Iranian agent' who had 'opened the door for Iranian influence in Iraq' since taking power.⁵² Abdullah's comments echo those made by previous Saudi officials, pre-dating the revolution, yet the increased influence of Iranian actors escalated these fears.⁵³ At this time, US diplomatic cables are dominated by Saudi and Bahraini efforts to securitise the Iranian threat to US audiences, calling on Washington to suspend normal politics and prevent rapprochement with Iran.⁵⁴

Life in Iraq became increasingly precarious with many fearing for their lives amid widespread violence and seemingly routine persecution. Within such a landscape, Sunni tribes across Anbar found themselves in bare life, trapped between Shi'a militias, Al Qa'ida franchises, coalition forces and the sectarian politics of Baghdad.⁵⁵

Struggling to meet basic needs and facing threats to their lives from Shi'a militias who were seemingly acting with impunity and without recourse to political or legal structures, a number of Sunni tribes were left with little option but to find protection from groups such as Da'ish.⁵⁶ Fragmentation of state structures across Iraq resulted in narratives of sectarian conflict consuming the political sphere, yet as Fanar Haddad has presciently argued, such claims fall wide of the mark.⁵⁷ Instead, fragmentation revealed a complex and fluid set of interactions around communal identities that may coalesce around sectarian identities but were far more nuanced, with repercussions beyond the borders of Iraq.

Similar strategies of political marginalisation can be seen across Saudi Arabia's response to the Arab Uprisings.⁵⁸ Fragmentation of political organisation created spaces of possibility for increased involvement of a range of actors, prompting the kingdom to cultivate and mobilise allies, typically along sectarian lines. The sectarianisation of geopolitics served as a means of securing influence across the region while simultaneously reducing the influence of their rivals.

For Saudi Arabia, action was necessary to curtail the burgeoning threat posed by Iran.⁵⁹ Supporting this, Prince Saud Al Faisal, the late Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, was reported as saying, 'You can't feast and leave your neighbours hungry'.⁶⁰ In contrast, for many in Iran, widespread anti-Iranian sentiment was a consequence of Saudi and American actions. According to Javad Zarif, 'Iranian "aggression" is a myth, easily perpetuated by those willing to spend their dollars on American military equipment and public-relations firms, and by those promising to protect American interest rather than those of their own people'.⁶¹

In these geopolitical conditions, regimes sought to circumvent domestic unrest through sectarianisation. As protest movements challenged the survival of authoritarian rulers, regimes began the process of closing communities off against the sectarian other, drawing on history and geopolitical fears as a means of ensuring their survival.

In Bahrain, sectarianisation has been taken alongside emergency laws in an attempt to regulate life, which has long been shaped by the exercise of power by the ruling Sunni minority over the Shi'a majority amid allegations of divided loyalties and long-standing Iranian claims to the island.⁶² The history of violent opposition in Bahrain fueled such suspicions, particularly with regard to the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) and rhetoric from Tehran.

In an attempt to ensure the survival of the regime, the Al Khalifa regime excluded Shi'a from the security services⁶³ and prominent ministries, although a number still held senior positions in the private sector, much like other states who experience 'sectarian violence'.⁶⁴ A second strategy was to reduce the demographic influence of the Shi'a, while the third strategy was to mobilise Sunni identities against their Shi'a counterparts to secure the regime's support base, a domestic move aimed at securing regional support.⁶⁵

Shortly after the protests began, Saudi-led GCC forces of the Peninsular Shield Force crossed the King Fahd causeway and entered Bahrain. The force was instrumental in crushing the protest movements and in the months to follow, a widespread crackdown on opposition figures – including MPs – ensued. In an attempt to secure support from

Sunnis in Bahrain and beyond, Shi'a groups were framed as fifth columnists, allies of Iran and part of a Shi'a crescent. Securitising moves helped cultivate such fears among Sunni Bahrainis, creating a climate where one Sunni businessman claimed that 'the Persians are everywhere'.⁶⁶ Such sentiments are also held by a number of state officials, revealed after the publication of an article by Fawaz bin Mohammad Al Khalifa that articulated the 'expansionist ambitions of the Persian Shia establishment', laying blame for unrest in Bahrain, Lebanon, Kuwait and Yemen at the door of Iran.⁶⁷

Such fears had routinely been expressed to US officials. In 2006, Bahraini officials argued that 'as long as Khamenei has the title of Commander-in-Chief, Bahrain must worry about the loyalty of Shia who maintain ties and allegiance to Iran'.⁶⁸ Among the island's Shi'a populations, such views are deeply offensive. One Bahraini Shi'a cleric declared that 'it is an insult to accuse me of following an Iranian agenda or being part of an Iranian vision of the region just for being from a Shi'a background'.⁶⁹ Fears of increased Shi'a involvement in political life resulted in widespread gerrymandering, the manipulation of electoral borders as a means of ensuring Sunni dominance in electoral districts as much as possible.

Fundamental to this adherence of this anti-Iranian sentiment were concerns in Manama that 'the Saudis would turn off the tap', revealing the collapse of distinctions⁷⁰ between (geo)politics and religion, where identities begin to play a dual role, demonstrating both nationalist and religious loyalties, leaving Bahrainis caught within a regional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their own domestic issues. Sectarianisation efforts drew upon both Bahraini history – notably long-standing Iranian claims to the island and the actions of the IFLB – and broader geopolitical fears. Amid such fears, sectarianising narratives found traction among many Sunni Bahrainis, quickly exacerbating divisions across the island, meaning that the Al Khalifa retained power and Shi'a opposition groups were largely marginalised from political, social and economic life.⁷¹

In Yemen, a similar story unfolded. While typically (inaccurately) reduced to a conflict over sectarian difference, Yemen is perhaps the best example of how a conflict gains sectarian meaning through taking on geopolitical importance. Prior to 2014, there was little talk of sectarian difference in a country whose complex divisions occur along tribal or political lines. Yet following the *coup d'état* against Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the rapidly increasing influence of the Houthi movement, this dramatically changed to the point that Saudi soldiers fighting in Yemen are told they are fighting against Shi'a heretics.

Saudi Arabia responded to the threat of growing Iranian influence in Yemen by building an alliance with the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, which sought to eradicate the Houthis, resulting in massive humanitarian consequences and allegations of war crimes.⁷² The complexity of political and security factors within the civil war created ample space for external actors to work towards their own geopolitical aspirations. The presence of a melange of actors laying claim to political legitimacy and authority fed into the fragmentation of the state, amid strong tribal currents, the presence of a powerful Al Qa'ida franchise, and burgeoning secessionist movements.⁷³ Amid allegations of Iranian support for the Houthis – given credibility by the Houthis

firing Iranian-made missiles at targets in Saudi Arabia – Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman accused Iran of 'direct military aggression', suggesting that Tehran's actions 'may be considered an act of war against the Kingdom'.⁷⁴ Yet in later incidents in 2019, more restraint was shown.

For Adel Al Jubeir, 'Iranian interventions in the region are detrimental to the security of neighbouring countries and affect international peace and security. We will not allow any infringement of our national security'.⁷⁵ Moreover, 'Iran's role and its direct command of its Houthi proxy in this matter constitute a clear act of aggression that targets neighbouring countries, and threatens peace and security in the region and globally'.⁷⁶ Although Saudi involvement in Yemen can be traced back to 1978 and the establishment of networks of patronage in support of its aims, the provision of financial support since 2007 to help the Yemeni state to buy wheat on global markets has left many in Riyadh with the belief that they have a say in Yemeni politics, which is increasingly viewed through a sectarian lens. While many in the kingdom hold the view that Yemeni politics 'should not be in opposition to Riyadh', the dominance of the Houthis have proved detrimental to the success of this strategy.⁷⁷ Saudi influence was traditionally exerted through 'bags of cash', although this was also matched by military support during the six Saada wars and while many were critical of Saudi involvement it is generally accepted that 'Iran will never pay the food bill for Yemen'.⁷⁸

In contrast, Iranian involvement in Yemen can be traced back to around 2006 when members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) provided Houthis and members of the southern Yemen population with weapons, tactics, financial resources and PR strategies. This led to collusion with Hizballah and the establishment of a strong network of informants, spies, developmental strategists, soldiers and politicians, which provided Iran with a strong degree of leverage and influence, albeit at very little expense. In spite of this involvement, US diplomatic cables from the years before the uprisings acknowledge that Houthi weapons were originally Yemeni army weapons bought on the black market.⁷⁹ There was no evidence of Iranian support at this time, although in the years that followed, Tehran offered a great deal more support to the Houthis.

The sectarianisation of regional politics took a different form with Saudi efforts to convert members of the Yemeni Zaydi community to Wahhabism. Reflecting the construction of space – as regional forces interact with the local factors – tribal leaders also saw this as a means through which they could circumvent the historical legacy of the *sayyid* (descendants of the Prophet) facilitating the fracturing of the Shi'a body politic.⁸⁰ Religious groups provided possibilities for achieving political ends in such conditions. In Bahrain where the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups were used to counter the threat posed by Shi'a groups and, although this policy was used after the uprisings, by 2014 pressure from Riyadh prevented its continued use.⁸¹ The same year, demands from Saudi Arabia and the UAE placed pressure on the Bahraini government to give key ministerial positions to independent politicians with strong links to the military and security sector who were recruited into politics after retiring to serve as independents in support of the Al Khalifa.⁸²

In Egypt, the securitisation of the Muslim Brotherhood built upon long-standing repression of the Brothers – and Sisters – as the Sisi regime sought to destroy the

group's political capacity, violently rejecting and crushing their beliefs in the process. As the family of one protester jailed in Egypt claimed, "The regime in Egypt is waging war against the young who dare to dream of a bright future for themselves and their country."⁸³ In the months that followed the toppling of Morsi, regime forces used force to destroy the infrastructure of the Muslim Brotherhood, killing thousands of its members in the process.

In Syria, although protests initially began around demands for political reform, the Assad regime constructed narratives of sectarian difference, as part of a mechanism of control. As protests escalated, a civil war broke out broadly although not exclusively⁸⁴ along sectarian lines,⁸⁵ as the Assad regime supported violent Sunni groups such as Al Qa'ida in an attempt to deepen such divisions and exacerbating the conflict. In a survey by *The Day After*, almost three-quarters of people asked responded that they had experienced sectarian discrimination.⁸⁶ This behaviour was not new. As Haider Al Khoei argued, the Syrian regime had long manipulated violent extremist agendas for their own ends, particularly after the 2003 invasion of Iraq when Sunni jihadists were incited to fight in Iraq.⁸⁷

Elements of the Syrian opposition initially sought to maintain the peaceful character of the revolution into the summer of 2011, rejecting the call to arms politically, nationally and ethically.⁸⁸ Yet as the regime became increasingly violent in its repression of events, the protestors armed themselves to protect their families and neighbourhoods amid huge power disparities with the regime.⁸⁹

With the emergence of protest movements across the country, Assad quickly sought to frame them as jihadists, part of an Al Qa'ida movement determined to topple his regime. Although this narrative quickly found traction, it faced a serious problem as most of the jihadists present in Syria were imprisoned. In an attempt to strengthen the regime narrative, a number of these prisoners were discretely released in the spring and summer of 2011, whereupon many joined groups including the forerunner of Da'ish. Reflecting on such events, then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson argued that the British position was that it was Assad's 'decision to let Daesh out of the jails to create this alternative for the West'.⁹⁰

After this manipulation of divisions within the fabric of Syrian society, fear quickly began to take hold and violence became a prominent feature of political life. As Yassin Al Haj Saleh suggests, the descent into fear was a prominent strategy of *tashbih* – a sense of collective paranoia – as regimes murder 'the very concept of truth'.⁹¹ In such conditions, it was hardly surprising that protestors took up arms in self-defence. The conflict quickly gained an international dimension through the construction and manipulation of sect-based networks that transcended the Syrian state,⁹² while the presence of Iranian, Russian and Hizballah figures further eroded sovereign power.⁹³ As societal schisms deepened, the fighting intensified, leading to mass casualties across the state and a descent into an intractable conflict.

Beyond the violence, a number of other strategies were used to retain the support of people across Syria. Public space took on existential importance and cities became battlegrounds. Urban environments underwent rapid transformation as they endured massive military bombardment in places such as Aleppo, while others were scarred by

the scale of fighting between rival groups. In places where violence had not escalated as far, urban landscapes were transformed in different ways, taking on increasingly militarised characteristics. Conflict also took place over contested historiographies and culture, as protestors challenged the meaning of poetry, narratives and music previously used by the regime in an effort to develop an emancipatory identity and to erode support for the Assad regime.⁹⁴

Similar events unfolded in Yemen, where fighting had a deleterious impact upon both the state and also the ability of people to meet their basic needs. Amid serious environmental challenges, water reserves rapidly depleted, 18.8 million people need some kind of humanitarian assistance while 17 million people are considered to be food insecure.⁹⁵ Politically, the unification of north and south looks increasingly precarious, particularly as southern separatists declare a state of emergency and reject the legitimacy of the Saudi supported government.⁹⁶

Political and structural repression of opposition groups across the Middle East was supported by people who feared that the escalation of conflict – albeit one that began in a quest to secure better democratic rights – would end in a similar situation to that found in Syria. Moreover, the sectarianisation of political life fuelled suspicions that democratic movements were cover for seditious activity, orchestrated by Iran. And with these fears, democratic aspirations were renounced by many in favour of security and stability.⁹⁷

Yet not all efforts to exacerbate sectarian divisions resulted in violence. A 2015 Da'ish attack on a mosque in Kuwait City was met by widespread condemnation while Sunni and Shi'a prayed together in a demonstration of unity. In an attempt to maintain this unity, hate speech was criminalised and in a number of speeches, the Emir made repeated pleas for unity, condemning those wishing to create discord. Claims to unity were echoed by a group of *diwaniyahs* – the Kuwaiti traditional 'gathering lounges' – who stressed the Kuwaiti spirit of devotion and togetherness,⁹⁸ while Shi'a political groups occupied a prominent role in the political system as a bulwark against other opposition groups.⁹⁹

Events such as this in Kuwait City and others such as the attack on a Shi'a Mosque in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia reveal the collapse of political and theological tensions. While many are quick to blame Hizballah-type organisations – and by extension Iran – for such actions, in recent years they have been conducted by groups such as Da'ish who wish to capitalise on burgeoning sectarian tensions. Anti-Shi'a rhetoric from Saudi leaders creates a climate where such attacks can take place. This strategy seeks to trap Sunni Arab regimes: either to demonstrate nationalist unity with Shi'a groups and risk alienating Sunni supporters, or to risk further instability by alienating Shi'a groups further.

The increasing sectarianisation of political life has other serious implications. Economic dimensions of sectarian difference are clearly seen in Syria, Lebanon and Bahrain and although events have been framed as sectarian struggles, a more nuanced analysis positions class within socio-political difference. In Lebanon, where society is still recovering from the civil war that left a deep scar on the psyche of the country, along with the more visible aspects of bullet holes across streets around the 'Green

Line, political life is organised along sectarian lines.¹⁰⁰ Yet within such sectarian blocs, economic factors are perhaps the real drivers of division, as wealthy business leaders cultivate difference as a mechanism of ensuring support from their constituencies, while also benefitting from divisions financially.¹⁰¹ Indeed, in recent years a number of cross-sectarian alliances have emerged,¹⁰² perhaps as a result of the power-sharing agreement. Thus, to reduce political divisions to a theological base wilfully ignores how divisions are being manipulated to suit the needs of a wealthy few.

Returning to the concept of *nomos*, we can see how sectarianisation processes seek to create order over space, but also to close off an inside against an outside, shaped by historical experience. This process of closing is different to previous processes, achieved through the displacement and exclusion of individuals from the inside, essentially closing them off from the community. This takes place through the framing of Shi'a groups as an existential threat to the survival of the community whose loyalties lie with a group that has been closed off against the inside. As a consequence, securitisation and sectarianisation moves seek to solidify the closing off of the inside against an outside, but also to strengthen the bonds of the inside against the outside from within, reordering regional politics in the process.

Necropolitics and war machines

Amid conditions of uncertainty and increasing violence, regimes sought to retain power through a plethora of strategies. While some reformed political structures, others sought to control life by stripping it of political meaning. In some cases, the fragmentation of the state meant that these strategies were not viable, leading to the emergence of necropolitics and mobilisation of war machines in a final attempt to exert sovereign power and ensure regime survival. In a number of states, regimes embarked on a dangerous yet calculated gambit designed to secure their rule by mobilising jihadist movements to create – and escalate – sectarian violence. Within such environments, regimes used excessive violence to regulate life, resulting in catastrophic loss of life and devastating humanitarian conditions. One consequence of this is the mobilisation of war machines – the manifestation of disruption against sovereign power – as an expression of agency.

The case of Da'ish offers a good example of the emergence of war machines out of fragmentation and the contestation of sovereign power in the years after the 2003 war.

An array of mistakes from Iraqi, US, UK and Iranian governments empowered Sunni militancy and amid conditions of marginalisation, securitisation and existential crises they drew support from people marginalised from political and economic structures. Fundamentally, the group was able to emerge as a consequence of the failure of Sunnis to find political representation, either formally or informally,¹⁰³ yet it is now generally accepted that the key strategists in the group were ex-Ba'athists, operating beyond state structures.

In conditions of uncertainty, around 50 PMUs emerged, with membership estimated to be between 60,000 and 140,000 people.¹⁰⁴ The identities of the PMUs provided opportunities for external actors to become involved in political life, raising questions about Iranian involvement and, in the longer term, debates about integration. In the struggle against Da'ish, militias played a key role in the liberation of Mosul and as such, Baghdad's efforts to curtail the power and influence of the groups bringing them into the institutional machinery of the state – many of whom had 'given blood' for Iraq – was met with a great deal of resistance.

This move sought to end the existence of the PMUs as war machines, although the level of criminality involved with such groups means that Baghdad may not be fully able to put an end to them. Yet the move evoked questions about the groups more broadly and the role of clerics such as Iraq's leading Shi'a cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who issued a number of fatwas calling on Iraqis to engage in political life in a number of often contradictory ways in the fifteen years after the US-led invasion. These not only mobilised Iraqis, but imbued lives with meaning, taking them from conditions of bare life into a more qualified political existence, revealing the impact of religious figures on political life.

In Yemen, the fragmentation of political organisation created space for countless groups and factions – often with competing agendas – to operate within the territorial shell of the state.¹⁰⁵ Underpinning the social fabric of the state was a complex and malleable tribal network that was shaped by the concerns of their respective leaders, leading to a range of transient alliances that cut across society. Groups possessed a range of different political aspirations that were driven by the contexts in which they were operating, where poverty, corruption and civil war were rife. Although external borders of the state have proved somewhat durable, internally a number of 'mini-states' each held together by its own internal logic, economy and political ecosystem.¹⁰⁶ The failure of the 2014 National Dialogue appears to contradict such a view, particularly amid the secessionist demands, which remain prevalent.¹⁰⁷ In such conditions, war machines shape Yemeni politics, in many cases often competing and funded by external actors, adding to the complexity and ferocity of the fighting.¹⁰⁸

The Houthi movement fought six wars with the Saleh regime between 2004 and 2010, during which time the group evolved from small cadre of fighters comprised of the family and friends of Hussein Badr Al Din Al Huthi, the group's leader, into an organisation that would pose an existential challenge to Saleh's leadership. Although routinely referred to an Iranian proxy, the Houthis were formed as an independent entity operating with national goals, yet Tehran's influence has increased in recent years.

The Houthi movement – which took on the formal name Ansar Allah, the Partisans of God, in 2011 – is one that is comprised of a range of fluid alliances, both overt and covert, but predicated on a 'precise knowledge' of tribal dynamics, albeit supported by Iran and Hizballah.¹⁰⁹ The fluidity of their alliances is seen in their willingness to work with Saleh, which allowed Ansar Allah to co-opt forces loyal to the former President, to capture Sana'a on 21 September 2014. Less than six months later, the group also overran the Yemeni government's 'fallback' capital of Aden in the longest-range operation

ever conducted by the group, reflecting its ability to draw upon local grievances and create alliances in an incredibly complex set of political dynamics. In such conditions of fragmentation, war machines took on more formal characteristics of state power, losing some of their fluidity in the process, while regimes took on characteristics of war machines, leading to increased instability and Saudi-led intervention.

Similar complexity is found in conflict zones across the region. As political life fragmented, war machines continued to emerge, capitalising on the elasticity of political structures. With the erosion of sovereign power, groups began to offer support and protection to communities across the region. Such conditions were exacerbated by the sectarianisation of regional politics, which imbued local politics with new meaning, often derived from geopolitical struggles. External support for proxies increased the contestation of sovereign power, adding to the conflation of regional and domestic politics that began to collapse into each other, along with the emergence of war machines that challenged political projects in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Yemen.

Of course, the emergence of a war machine is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, if we look at the history of the region, when sovereignty fragments, war machines emerge, further adding to the contestation of power. Within the context of sectarianisation, the manifestation of this type of war machine often serves to reproduce sectarian difference, particularly when they are sponsored by external actors propagating their own agendas. The emergence of increasingly violent war machines documents the weakness of sovereign power and the strength of *asabiyyah* amid political fragmentation. In such conditions, the sect emerges as a new form of life as regimes practice necropolitics on marginalised masses, along sect-based lines. In pursuit of such an aim, war machines from the same *asabiyyah* are often co-opted, subsumed into state structures as a mechanism of control. Although seemingly against the deterritorialised nature of the concept, this reveals the fluidity of sovereign power and complexity of different logics deployed to regulate life. Such an approach also serves as a mechanism to colonise life 'from below', defining the inside against an outside, restricting and regulating life in the process.

Beyond the manifestation of war machines, other regimes have sought to maintain sovereign power through recourse to necropolitics. The brutality of the Assad regime was seen in the early days of the uprisings but by this point, it was well versed in dealing with challenges to its rule, much like a number of its neighbours. Since Hafez Al Assad came to power in 1971, political activity was limited through the violent regulation of life and subjugation of it to death in times of crisis, such as in Hama. In 2011, protestors stressed the peaceful nature of their actions, offering flowers, food and water to soldiers that had been sent to crush their expressions of political dissent. In response, a number of prominent individuals were arrested, tortured and killed; their mutilated bodies were later returned to their families for burial. Tens of thousands of protesters were 'disappeared' into government prisons, where tales of torture and inhumane cruelty continue to be told. This was, as Al Haj Saleh notes, the action of a colonial aggressor, internal to the very structure of the state.

In Syria, death became a consequence of torture, not a by-product of it, and as a consequence necropolitics became the logic of governmentality through which

the Syrian state exerted power and subjected large segments of the population to 'political and symbolic extermination'.¹¹⁰ With the escalation of the conflict, the Syrian regime used chemical weapons on its own population, seeking to regulate life by subjugating it to death. This was not an isolated incident, but as UN war crimes investigators suggested, by April 2018, there were thirty-four confirmed cases of the use of chemical weapons.¹¹¹

The Assad regime used all possible mechanisms to regulate life and death, drawing on a range of issues including the exclusionary ideas of 'Absolute Arabism', sectarian difference and the socio-economic climate that had created the Shabiha, a militia with close links to the Assad family. The Shabiha operates as an example of the war machine, regulating life through repression and restriction and making money through appropriation, although in this case war machines were hiding behind the mask of the state. In such conditions, repression transforms into business, a new model of governance that rewards those who are loyal to the regime, allowing Shabiha to make money through appropriating the production of others, while creating – and capitalising upon – conditions of *tashbih* (typically understood in the Syrian context as 'thuggishness') that found traction amid sectarian biases and divisions within communities. As violence increased and the regime faced increasingly existential challenges, the Shabiha took on a prominent role in the defence of the regime as security was privatised. Unlike other manifestations of the war machine, this is not just an armed militia. Instead, and this point should be carefully stressed, it is a powerful state actor with responsibilities that is using its regulatory force to subjugate life to death in support of the regime's goal: survival at all costs.

Rent and reform

In contrast to regimes who used political and legal strategies that were underpinned by the use of violence, others responded in different ways. Those predicated upon the rentier bargain were able to draw upon a variety of methods to placate protest movements, essentially buying off protest movements within the context of the current social contract. Yet a number of regimes also engaged in reform of political systems and those involved in political life.

The largest of all reform packages was in Saudi Arabia – representing the fear felt by many in the Al Saud about the consequences of protests breaking out across the kingdom – where a welfare package of around \$130 billion was announced. Bigger than the state's 2007 budget, it contained a raft of new jobs in the Ministry of Interior – adding to the burgeoning public sector employment problem – along with five hundred thousand new houses, an increased minimum wage and general infrastructural improvements.¹¹² It was supplemented by a number of reforms, including permitting women to vote and run in municipal elections.¹¹³ In Bahrain, twenty thousand new jobs were promised in the Ministry of Interior.¹¹⁴ The UAE offered around \$2 billion for new housing loans, dwarfed by Qatar's pledge of \$8 billion for salary and benefit payments. In the UAE, around \$1.55 billion was invested into infrastructural projects

and commitments to keep food prices low. In Kuwait, around \$3,500 was given to each national along with a promise that basic food items would be free for two years.¹¹⁵

In March 2011 a GCC fund was established for Bahrain and Oman that saw Manama and Muscat receiving \$10 billion each over a ten-year period to facilitate infrastructure developments. It was later announced that the GCC fund would also provide developmental assistance worth \$5 billion to both Jordan and Morocco, alongside debate about expanding the GCC.¹¹⁶ It was through the provision of financial assistance that Saudi Arabia began to take on an increasingly prominent regional role, using its financial might to influence actors amid widespread instability.

While few Gulf states suffered serious damage in the uprisings, the situation worsened in 2014, when the price of oil dropped around 70% over the previous year. The impact was felt across the region, where spending was dramatically cut and harsh austerity measures were imposed in Saudi Arabia after an IMF report suggested that the kingdom would run out of money within five years at its current rate.¹¹⁷ This prompted a raft of new policies aimed at invigorating the kingdom's economy, spearheaded by a new Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman. While Saudi Arabia was the outlier, other states across the region were also affected, requiring serious reconsideration of social contracts and political organisation. Ultimately, the Gulf states – Bahrain aside – were largely able to circumvent unrest by updating their social contracts but this required ongoing demonstrations of responsibility towards citizens.

Others undertook minor reform as a mechanism of placating protesters. In Jordan, forty-two minor constitutional amendments were issued,¹¹⁸ along with changes to electoral laws. Electoral laws were also changed in Kuwait¹¹⁹ while religious figures were banned from standing in elections in Bahrain.¹²⁰ In Oman, a number of ministers were removed from office following protester demands to eradicate corruption. Constitutional reform in the aftermath of the uprisings both acquiesced to protester demands as in Egypt and Oman, but also reverted back to characteristics of the *ancien régime*, as in Yemen, where following the removal of Ali Abdullah Salah, the country returned to single-candidate elections for the office of president. Constitutional reform in moments of disjuncture is a characteristic feature of the Middle East. During the 1950s and 1960s, amid a period of political turmoil, constitutions became malleable documents through which political agendas were expressed. Yet although agendas were expressed in a number of states, the complexity of political situations and deep grievances created conditions that could be triggered into mass violence.

The uprising and the *coup d'état*

The story of the Muslim Brotherhood's rise – and fall – in the years after the Arab Uprisings is perhaps emblematic of the struggle over political life in the Middle East and competing visions of the ordering of space.¹²¹ After the toppling of Hosni Mubarak, the military retained control under the leadership of SCAF, revoking emergency legislation¹²² and holding parliamentary and presidential elections across 2011–12 that resulted in the election of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohammad Morsi, and

a number of candidates from the Freedom and Justice Party. While in power, many expressed concerns at the extent to which Morsi and the Brotherhood had been able to undertake serious change within state institutions and infrastructure. As Nathan Brown noted, the power of the deep state in Egypt meant that Morsi was unable to exert serious influence over the military and security services, leaving him without real power.¹²³

Although in the early stages of the uprisings the official line of the Brotherhood was to remain neutral, younger members of the organisation played an integral role in driving events.¹²⁴ In spite of deep schisms within the *ikhwan* between those who advocated neutrality and those who desired more involvement, prior to the 'Day of Rage', the group announced that it was endorsing the protest movements, calling on its members to join protesters in the streets.¹²⁵ This decision was essential in increasing the legitimacy of the *ikhwan*, where the group's members were praised for their courage.¹²⁶

After almost sixty years of political marginalisation, the Muslim Brotherhood was invited into the SCAF-supervised interim administration to participate in a nation dialogue to shape the future of Egypt.¹²⁷ In presidential elections, the Ikhwan sought to 'participate, not to dominate' with the goal of working towards a vision of national unity.¹²⁸ A spokesperson for the group stressed that they were 'willing to form an alliance with the political forces that agree to our principles, whether they are socialists, liberals, or other Islamist forces and all forces concerned about this homeland'.¹²⁹

The founding statement of the Freedom and Justice Party, the Brotherhood's political wing, stressed the goal of inclusion, working to rebuild state institutions and aspiring to cultivate the Egyptian political community.¹³⁰ On 24 June 2012, Mohammed Morsi was appointed as President of Egypt with 51.7% of the vote, the first time an Islamist had been democratically chosen to lead a modern Arab state.

In spite of inclusive aspirations, Morsi's rule was not without problems. For some such as Asef Bayat, this was to be expected as the group experienced the transition to 'post-Islamism',¹³¹ yet it was the creation of a new constitution¹³² that gave Morsi and the Brotherhood increasingly authoritarian powers – and emergency powers that went beyond those of Mubarak – which was ultimately the cause of their downfall as they failed to live up to their promise of inclusion and creating an Egypt for all.¹³³ Ultimately, the constitution sought to strengthen the Brotherhood's position as a means of overcoming the political deadlock that had consumed the country.¹³⁴

In protest at the new constitution, sit-ins and marches quickly followed the constitutional decree and Morsi's intention to hold a referendum on its application. Once again, thousands of people entered Tahrir Square to protest against the regime where they were met by *ikhwan* supporters.¹³⁵ In early December, clashes took place across Cairo between protesters and supporters of the *ikhwan* while chants reminiscent of early 2011 rang out.¹³⁶ In the months leading up to the *coup d'état*, Morsi's government lost what little support it had retained after the constitutional crisis and on 3 July 2013, Morsi was forced from power.¹³⁷ In the aftermath of the *coup d'état*, the military once again seized power, demonstrating the power and prevalence of the 'deep state'.

Reflecting increased insecurity following the coup, Emergency Law No. 162 of 1958¹³⁸ was reinstated by presidential decree on 13 August 2013. Derogation occurred

to allow for the clearing of two Muslim Brotherhood camps¹³⁹ leaving six hundred dead and four thousand injured in what would become known as the Rabaa Massacre, where sovereign power was exerted by controlling death.¹⁴⁰

Conclusions: the failure of the uprisings?

On 2 March 2017, an Egyptian court of appeal found former President Hosni Mubarak innocent of a number of charges including complicity in the murder of protesters in 2011 and corruption. Although sentenced to life in prison in 2012 for conspiracy to murder 239 demonstrators, the case offers a symbolic 'closing of the circle' with the continuation of the deep state that once had Mubarak as its figurehead.¹⁴¹ Over a year later the Egyptian parliament ratified a draft bill giving immunity and unprecedented privileges to key military officials involved in the Rabaa massacre at the discretion of the President.¹⁴²

In contrast, on 27 November 2017, a Kuwaiti court sentenced fifty people to prison for storming parliament in 2011, including the prominent opposition figure Musallam Al Barrack. Al Barrack, who had previously spoken about how the Al Sabah's response to the uprisings risked dragging the country into 'a dark abyss', was sentenced to nine years, while other protesters received sentences ranging from one to five years. The defendants were comprised of Salafis, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, youth activists and secular figures who had colluded in an anti-corruption protest in November 2011.

Political discourse centred around democracy and governance, while political reform was deemed central to improving the quality of life, but reform was viewed with suspicion by many. As regimes responded to protest movements with violence and Syria and Yemen descended into intractable violence, debate quickly moved away from democracy to focus upon security and stability.¹⁴³ As one individual recounted, 'We can't say we have full democracy, but we are educated and progressing. But people don't necessarily want democracy immediately. We saw what happened in Iraq.'¹⁴⁴ Similar arguments continue to be made about events in Syria and Yemen, where regimes across the region are framing democracy and participatory politics as a slippery slope into intractable conflict. Another individual noted that regimes propagate narratives of choice: 'Do you want Syria or us?'¹⁴⁵ As one Omani stressed, 'after the escalation of violence in Syria, people now think that stability is more important'.¹⁴⁶

The aftermath of the uprisings was a struggle to regulate political life and the struggle between life and death more broadly. Although previous efforts to exert sovereign control were focused on the regulation of life and *letting life live*, in such contested periods, a number of regimes sought to exert control by subjugating life to death. The struggle to regulate life and impose order over space, over *ordnung* and *ortung*, became the central feature of the post-uprisings Middle East. Efforts to retain power through regulating and taking life challenged the territorial organisation of space within the context of the spatialised exception. As sovereign power became

contested, the localisation of the exception and the order that regulated it were also challenged. From this, new spaces of possibility emerged, zones of indistinction that could be moulded according to a particular vision, beyond the borders of the state.

A key part of such strategies was the sectarianisation of political life, where a number of Arab regimes sought to frame events within the context of burgeoning Iranian power. In doing so, they spoke to domestic populations and framed events as a consequence of nefarious Iranian influence. Framing events in such a way was a prominent part of closing off an inside against an outside, albeit an outside that had previously been inside, securing the community and contributing to the reorganisation of regional politics. Yet as we shall see, this was not unproblematic amid the complex polarity of the region and the influence of Qatar, Turkey and Israel.

The evolution of sovereign power reveals a great deal about the nature of political organisation within a particular time and space. In Syria and Yemen, where political projects had dramatically fragmented, the recourse to necropolitics and mobilisation of war machines was hardly surprising. As political projects had been embedded within – and shaped by – parabolic regional pressures, the creation of new political spaces was almost inevitable, as a number of actors sought to ensure their own survival and improve their standing by dramatically altering the ordering of regional space. In doing this, the struggle to regulate life and define spatial boundaries became even more incendiary, with repercussions across the Middle East.

Notes

- 1 Some Iranian colleagues reject this claim, instead suggesting that Khomeini's election in 1979 was the first example of this type.
- 2 Shadi Hamid and Meredith Wheeler argue that the evolution of political life in Egypt was neither 'wholly autocratic nor wholly democratic'. Shadi Hamid and Meredith Wheeler, 'Was Mohammed Morsi Really an Autocrat?' (*Atlantic*, 31.03.14), available at www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/03/was-mohammed-morsi-really-an-autocrat/359797 (accessed 31.03.14). Instead, Hamid suggests that the Morsi regime was reflective of the Brotherhood broadly: a reform-minded organisation but one that advocated gradualism rather than revolution in an attempt to 'wrest control' from the bureaucratic structures of the deep state. Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism*.
- 3 'All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt' (Human Rights Watch, 12.08.14), available at www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-to-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt (accessed 12.08.14).
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Michelle Dunne and Scott Williamson, 'Egypt's Unprecedented Instability by the Numbers' (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 24.03.14), available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/24/egypt-s-unprecedented-instability-by-numbers-pub-55078> (accessed 01.08.19).

- 7 'UN Human Rights Council: Adoption of the UPR Report on Egypt' (Human Rights Watch, 20.03.15), available at www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/20/un-human-rights-council-adoption-upr-report-egypt (accessed 01.08.19).
- 8 In the UK, pressure from the Gulf resulted in calls to proscribe the Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation, which was ultimately rejected.
- 9 Raf Sanchez and Associated Press, 'Journalist in Bahrain was "Murdered by Member of Royal Family", Activists Claim' (*Telegraph*, 29.12.16), available at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/12/29/journalist-bahrain-murdered-member-royal-family (accessed 16.05.17).
- 10 Al Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution*, p. 65.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 12 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 26.
- 13 Mona El-Ghobashy, 'The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution', *Middle East Report*, 258 (2011), 2–13.
- 14 Kasbarian and Mabon, 'Contested Spaces'.
- 15 Derogation from constitutional responsibilities is permitted under Article 4 of the International Bill of Human Rights.
- 16 'The Mubarak Regime Persists' (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 20.09.11), available at <https://eipr.org/en/press/2011/09/mubarak-regime-persists> (accessed 04.10.14).
- 17 'Egyptian Constitution Approved in Referendum' (BBC News, 23.12.12), available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20829911 (accessed 23.12.12).
- 18 See Presidential Decree No. 136 of 2014. See also 'Egypt: Decree Allowing Armed Forces to Assist Law Enforcement Agencies in Protecting Government and Public Facilities' (*Global Legal Monitor*, 06.11.14), available at www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/egypt-decree-allowing-armed-forces-to-assist-law-enforcement-agencies-in-protecting-government-and-public-facilities (accessed 01.08.19).
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 '25 January 2013: The Revolution Two Years On ... Injustice Continues State Crimes Remained Unpunished: The Interior Ministry Is Above the Law and the Public Prosecution is Missing in Action' (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 22.01.13), available at <https://eipr.org/en/publications/25-january-2013-revolution-two-years-injustice-continues-state-crimes-remained> (accessed 22.01.13).
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 'Egypt Where Impunity Is Entrenched and Accountability Is Absent' (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 31.12.14), available at <https://eipr.org/en/press/2014/12/egypt-where-impunity-entrenched-and-accountability-absent> (accessed 31.12.14).
- 23 Al Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution*, p. 96.
- 24 'Syria protests: Assad to Lift State of Emergency' (BBC News, 20.04.11), available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-middle-east-13134322 (accessed 04.10.14).
- 25 See Reuters, 'Kuwait Court Hand Down Two Years Jail Sentence for Insulting Emir'.
- 26 Mabon, 'Kingdom in Crisis'.
- 27 Georgina Enzer, 'Saudi Arabia Forces All Bloggers to get a License' (ITPnet, 13.01.11); and 'Reactions to Amended Saudi Press and Publications Law Banning Insults to Public Figures' (MEMRI, 31.05.11).
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