Conclusion: The end of the dream

The story of our struggle has finally become known. We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings ... *Once we were somebodies about whom people cared.*

Hannah Arendt, *We Refugees* (emphasis added)

On 2 October 2018, Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist, walked into the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul where he was murdered by senior intelligence officers, allegedly with the approval of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. In the days that followed, questions about what happened to Khashoggi dominated news cycles around the world, while diplomats from the kingdom's allies pulled out of an investment conference due to take place in Saudi Arabia. Following in the footsteps of Raif Badawi and many others, the incident reveals a great deal about the extent to which authoritarian leaders will go in order to silence critics and maintain power, much like in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings where violence was used to crush protest movements, seemingly whatever the cost.

The fragmentation of sovereign borders and retreat into communal identities collapsed domestic and regional politics into new spaces of the political that placed regime survival above human security, albeit not curtailed by territorial borders. Following regime responses to the uprisings, intractable conflicts have emerged, becoming all-encompassing, dividing societies and communities along political lines. Socio-economic contexts add additional characteristics to these divisions, creating conditions that give rise to mafia groups who are able to capitalise on marginalisation and instability. The allocation of resources and jobs becomes a mechanism through which control is exerted and as such, performing identity becomes essential to ensuring survival.

With the fragmentation of the state and emergence of competing claims to sovereignty, the biopolitical regulation of life provided the mechanisms of control to regulate life through stripping it of its political meaning. Across the region, the

creation of bare life was a mechanism of sovereign power, designed to ensure order and compliance. Yet in a number of cases, the creation of bare life was an insufficient expression of sovereign power. Instead, we see regimes choosing to exert sovereign power through necropolitics, with war machines emerging as a consequence of widespread fragmentation.

In such conditions, localised manifestations of the global *nomos*, defined by a spatialised exception and underpinned by conditions of modernity have become increasingly contested by the contingency of daily life. Amid such contestation, definitions of the outside against an inside become increasingly complex, while regime efforts to maintain sovereign power shifted from the regulation of life to the subjugation of life to death. In conditions of necropolitics, replete with death zones and war machines, human life operates in a Hobbesian state of nature, a war of all against all.¹ There is little doubt that the crises in Syria and Yemen have become humanitarian tragedies on a devastating scale, driven by the mobilisation of war machines seeking to exert power in the face of – and hiding behind the mask of – state power. Regulating life through controlling death, regimes seek to maintain power regardless of the human cost.

The evolution of sovereign projects meant that wars were waged for societies not the sovereign, to devastating effect. With that in mind, such a view alludes to the emergence of a battle between races, resulting in the emergence of state racism. As Foucault argues in *Society Must Be Defended*, ‘a racism that society will direct against itself, against its own elements and its own products ... the internal racism of permanent purification, and it will become one of the basic dimensions of social normalization.’² While the Israeli–Palestinian conflict particularly in the aftermath of the nation-state law, is a prime example of such a racial struggle, as documented by the likes of Eyal Weizman and Achille Mbembe, events in Iraq, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen possess a number of similar characteristics. Yet with the collapse of the distinction between internal and external, along with the framing of sect as a main point of difference within political life, we see similar processes emerging along sectarian lines, where such difference becomes all consuming.

In states such as Lebanon that have attempted to rectify societal divisions through democratic means, schisms within society have become embedded within political structures that have prevented the descent into all-out violence. A survey conducted by the Arab Barometer found that 52% of Lebanese participants reported that no party is close to representing their political, social and economic aspirations.³ Additionally, only the army is seen as a trustworthy public institution, while only 8% of respondents trusted the government, 10% trusted parliament and 17% trusted the courts and legal system. In Beirut, these figures are dramatically lower, with only 1% trusting the government, 2% parliament and 6% trusting the courts and legal system.⁴ Unsurprisingly the economic situation is identified as one of the two major challenges facing Lebanon according to 64% of respondents, while 43% of respondents viewed the presence of Syrian refugees in the country as one of the two major challenges.⁵

Education plays a powerful role in such matters. One interviewee recalled a lack of historical awareness through the curriculum,⁶ while another suggested that only

recently have Gulf states started to teach on ideas of nationalism.⁷ The focus upon community rights places greater emphasis upon the power of particular groups within society at the expense of individual rights, regardless of the text and indeed sentiment of constitutions or Basic Laws. Instead, groups derive power and legitimacy from history and culture that provide a reservoir of norms to facilitate the ordering of life, albeit with implications for spatial borders. Yet stressing the dominance of communities only serves to reify divisions, whereas a move towards greater acceptance of individual rights can facilitate a move beyond community divisions. Of course, such an approach is easy to discuss in theory but in practice, far harder to implement, particularly amid civil war or serious political, theological and socio-economic tensions.

Strategies to retain control amid myriad competing pressures has ultimately contributed to the evisceration of state sovereignty and the fragmentation of the regional order. The rejection of national identities, securitisation of sectarian identities and decision to view events through the lens of communitarian – or indeed sectarian – interests has created a political environment that contributes to the entrenchment and replication of division at the cost of human safety and well-being. Although sectarian narratives have been applied and writ large across the region, the manifestation of sectarian difference is contingent upon context. We must remember the importance of context-specific contingent factors when conducting this analysis, which can lead to different regional manifestations of sectarian difference as a consequence of different political contexts.

Just as the construction of space is a consequence of the interaction of the intimately small with the global – and all in-between – political life in the Middle East is shaped by the interaction of local, regional and international forces. Domestic affairs occur within the context of broader events, while regional and international actors capitalise on internal affairs in pursuit of their own agendas. Amid a climate of fear and the descent into *asabiyyah*, ensuring support from more powerful actors is of paramount importance, yet in doing so, events become imbued with new meaning, adding to the challenge of working towards reconciliation.

In failing to respond to the deep structural grievances that drove the protests in 2011, regimes remain in a precarious situation. At the time of writing, protests are breaking out across Algeria – following Sudan and Iraq – amid frustration at similar socio-economic conditions that resulted in the events of 2011. Those closely watching the Middle East were not surprised, as economic instability and uncertainty continue to plague the region. A piece in the *Financial Times* titled ‘How the Middle East Is Sowing the Seeds of a Second Arab Spring’ suggested that conditions that gave rise to the protest movements of 2011 had not been addressed. Instead, rising youth unemployment, huge public sector wage bills, heavy subsidies on food and fuel and declining foreign direct investment underpinned by continued repression left the region ripe for further revolution.⁸

These fundamental challenges were supported by the findings of the 2018 Arab Barometer, which revealed that 30% of people in the Arab region continue to live ‘in need’, meaning that household incomes fail to cover necessary expenditures. Economic pressures mean that 55% of those living in need require financial support, with 17%

requiring handouts and charitable assistance from family and friends and a further 15% on charitable organisations. Of those asked, 55% had negative views of their home country's political situations, with 33% of people suggesting that economic issues were the most pressing challenges. Some 22% suggested that political issues and governance were the most pressing, while only 10% suggested that safety and security were the biggest threat. The rule of law was widely criticised. Only 28% of Arab publics felt the rule of law was applied universally, while 52% of respondents believed that some groups were shown preferential treatment.⁹

Underpinning such factors is latent structural discrimination against women. In a survey conducted by Pew Research, five of the bottom six countries with the lowest percentage share of females in the workforce were from the Middle East. While the global median female share of the workforce is 45.4%, in Qatar, the lowest ranked state, it is 13.4%.¹⁰ In economic performance, it is hardly surprising to see Israel ranked highest out of all Middle Eastern states, followed by states from the Gulf.

The Arab region has the highest youth unemployment rate in the world, along with increasing birth rates. It also has one of the largest public sector wage bills, deepening dependence on foreign debt and bond markets. One consequence is the redrawing of social contracts. The 2018 Arab Youth Survey documented a widespread frustration at recent events. When asked if things in the Arab world as a region have moved in the right direction or in the wrong direction over the past ten years, 55% answered in the negative. Within those respondents were 89% of people from Lebanon, 88% from Jordan and 83% from Palestine. In contrast, across the Gulf, 57% of people answered that things had moved in the right direction.¹¹

Western (in)action

In spite of routinely espousing the values and merits of freedom, justice and democracy, Western responses to the uprisings were characterised by indecision, first over whether to support the protest movements, second over intervention and third with regard to maintaining links with regimes that are routinely considered to be abusers of human rights. Although the Arab Uprisings were driven by demands for greater democratic accountability, world leaders were largely uncertain on how to respond, caught between providing support to autocratic allies or endorsing demands for greater political equality. Comments from Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and former British Prime Minister David Cameron were replete with uncertainty and, over time, rife with contradiction, perhaps best seen in the White House's responses to events in Egypt and Bahrain.

As regimes fought back against protesters, Western governments continued to support their allies in a triumph of realpolitik over normative concerns. Supplementing this were arms sales to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, in spite of concerns that these weapons were being used in Yemen against civilians and allegations of war crimes. Underpinning Western policy towards the uprisings were long-standing fears about both Political Islam and Iran. These views were routinely inaccurate, with one former

official suggesting that the ideologies of the Brotherhood and Al Qa'ida were 'all the same'.¹² Such views meant that violence was often reduced to 'ancient hatreds'. From Obama and other world leaders, to respected analysts such as Richard Haas, this Orientalist thesis is deeply problematic and has facilitated the deaths of hundreds of thousands through inaction. We should not view inaction solely as the lack of military intervention, but rather as the failure to do anything at all.¹³

Similar views were echoed by Carla Del Ponte, a UN War Crimes Prosecutor, who resigned following the inaction of her employer, arguing that 'everyone in Syria is now bad'.¹⁴ This is, of course, a seismic oversimplification. There is no doubt that violence in Syria has escalated to a devastating level yet providing support to groups who were working to overthrow authoritarian leaders was deemed to run contrary to the *realpolitik* of national interest. Engagement with the conflict is replete with generalisations,¹⁵ alongside what have been alleged as racist views of the Syrian opposition, most devastatingly seen in the case of the White Helmets and their association with various Al Qa'ida organisations, which resulted in serious funding cuts.¹⁶ Of course, a great deal of this is predicated on the predominance of the state as the vanguard of sovereign power amid a broader struggle between the homogenising powers of globalisation and the nation state itself, between global and local *nomoi*.

Theoretical reflections

Although predominantly driven by empirical questions, the project has raised a number of theoretical points. Sovereign power has been at the centre of our inquiry, which allows us to understand the regulation of life and space, along with the way in which contestation emerges. As we have seen, the ideas of Agamben, Mbembe and Arendt offer strong theoretical support to understand the process through which human life is regulated by the sovereign. The struggle to regulate life has taken place in a number of different forms, shaped by local context, from stripping life of political meaning to controlling life by subjugating it to death. Running alongside all of this is the continued presence of war machines that contest state power.

The regulation of life has implications for the ordering of time and space, with the concept of *nomos* central in helping us understand the manifestation of sovereign power on human agency. Questions about spatial ordering and normative visions of organisation – *ordnung* and *ortung* – are central to discussions of *nomos*. Myriad factors shape the interaction of *ordnung* and *ortung*, from competing visions of how to live as set out by Peter Berger and Robert Cover, to the geopolitical pressures that feature prominently in space across the Middle East. Fundamental to both dimensions are questions about sovereign power and the interaction between *ordnung* and *ortung* that creates the localised *nomos*. Tensions between these competing visions and spatial borders have had clear implications for the ordering of space and for political life in the hundred years since the end of the Ottoman Empire, from the Arab nationalist movement to the construction of a Shi'a crescent and will continue to do so as communities seek to define themselves.¹⁷

In the global *nomos* of the spatialised exception, the struggle to order such localised spaces is a prominent feature of political life. From the creation of a state of exception and as the normalisation of this exception becomes permanent, zones of indistinction are created. Distinction between *zoe* and *bios* blurred with the emergence of a nation state and as a consequence, 'human life is politicised only through an abandonment to an unconditional power of death'.¹⁸ Amid such conditions of competing and contested sovereignty, the spatially defined and ordered *nomos* locates the exception within context and contingency, but in ordering life challenges the very relationship between *ordnung* and *ortung*, along with the broader spatial aspects of political organisation that become contested amid competing visions of the organisation of life. In engaging with these questions, Geneive Abdo's comments about the primacy of the state and role of religion opens up a zone of indistinction between competing visions of sovereign power, creating space for dissent to emerge. In such conditions, the sovereign makes decisions not just about the life and death of human beings but over who is a human being at all. As such, to paraphrase Agamben, within bare life the *homo sacer* stands outside of the law while simultaneously being abandoned by it, relating to the law through their exclusion from it.

Whither the dream

In the aftermath of the uprisings, the relationship between rulers and ruled has been shaken amid contrasting conditions across the region. From an evolving rentier bargain in the Gulf to the ongoing war in Syria and Yemen, the nature of political organisation appears dramatically different. We should not be surprised at regime responses to the Arab Uprisings. Consideration of state-building processes reveals a history of regimes acting in pursuit of their survival, deploying governance structures of (neo) patrimonialism and, when conditions call for it, regulating life through subjugating it to death. Amid seemingly existential fragmentation that has consumed societies, the implications of such conflicts will be felt long after battles are over, spilling out beyond the borders of sovereign states and subsuming others in broader regional struggles.

While the fallout from the uprisings and conflict is perhaps the most pressing challenge to peace and stability across the Middle East, there are a number of other issues confronting regimes. With a population increase of 53% between 1991 and 2010,¹⁹ the pressure on regimes across the region to provide job opportunities increased dramatically, yet the inability to provide employment either in the public sector or to create a vibrant private sector, fed into a lack of trust in politics. Projected growth rates suggest that by 2020 it is estimated that there will be over three hundred and fifty million people living in countries 'vulnerable to conflict', which is expected to double by 2050. Such deep structural conditions are exacerbated by the growth of an increasingly vocal middle class making serious demands on the state,²⁰ where the capacity of Gulf states to act was reduced by a fall in oil prices. Changes in the demographic construction of states and the fluidity of peoples across the region resulted in serious challenges for the management of space, particularly in urban environments. The struggle to regulate life has led to increased political violence and repression as the (re)construction of

society after a moment of disjuncture threatened to – and in many cases did – rupture relations between rulers and ruled.

The speed of environmental change poses additional challenges that require structural responses to ensure access to water and to maintain stability in times of chaos. Ensuring the governance of such rapid urban expansions poses a serious challenge to local and national elites, whose legitimacy is bound up in the provision of security. Underpinning all of this is a burgeoning sense of frustration at the other. With the increasingly fractious relationship between *ordnung* and *ortung*, new sites of contestation emerge. Amid an influx of people from different backgrounds, latent racism increases, often resulting in acts of violence against incoming residents. The emergence of an increasingly tech-savvy generation poses a new set of challenges for ruling elites, particularly across urban environments.

There are also longer-term implications for those displaced from their homes within the context of the collapse of internal and external politics. Those forced to flee from Syria, Yemen or Iraq typically find themselves in states that are not signatories of UN conventions on refugees and, as a consequence, lack the necessary infrastructure to protect people. A generation of Syrians will grow up without proper schooling and health care, at home and abroad, struggling to assimilate into increasingly xenophobic environments made more so by continued violence and sectarian narratives and latent trauma.²¹ Beyond Syria, those stripped of nationality face similar challenges, abandoned by the law yet bound by it, while the intergenerational nature of statelessness poses a challenge to future generations.

The process of post-war reconstruction – albeit before the war has officially ended – provided the Asad regime with a further opportunity to ensure his survival. Recognising the need to attract foreign direct investment (FDI), Urban Law Renewal 10 allows for the mass confiscation of refugee property, offering areas for potential redevelopment and valuable urban real estate.²² Although some frame it as ‘reconstruction legislation’, the political dimensions are easily seen. Legislation prevents people from returning to their homes while unrealistic demands for paperwork in the midst of a conflict zone makes it difficult to prove ownership. All of which serves as a means of expropriating land for political, religious and economic reasons. The first areas to be redeveloped under Law 10 are Barzeh, Jobar, Qaboun and Yarmouk, all of which had previously been besieged rebel areas of Damascus. Estimates suggest that one in three homes across Syria have been destroyed, posing serious challenges to lasting – and peaceful – redevelopment.

Similar issues plague Yemen, where almost eighteen million are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. As fighting continues to devastate the state, getting aid into Yemen is increasingly difficult. The port city of Hudaydah, where 80% of the country’s aid is received, continues to be the scene of fierce conflict. Beyond Syria and Yemen, fragmentation of political organisation continues to have a devastating impact in Iraq and Gaza. Those displaced from their homes within and beyond state borders face countless challenges amid reconciliation efforts and survival efforts that are jeopardised by the cultivation of normative environments that breed racism. On the Greek island of Lesbos, Kurdish refugees are persecuted by groups pledging allegiance to Da’ish on

ethnic grounds.²³ Post-conflict reconstruction is traditionally a precarious process, but increasingly poisonous regional dynamics add an extra challenge.

Of course, all (in)action has consequences and within the consequences of the securitisation of sectarian identities, people are left to pay the price. Across the region the repercussions of dealing with politics through communal identities creates a volatile environment where individual rights are sacrificed for the benefit of regime survival. With anti-Shi'a rhetoric becoming commonplace in the region and beyond, there are serious implications for Shi'a minorities and, conversely, for Sunni communities when Shi'a groups respond. Yet there are a number of instances where such binary politics is challenged. In Kuwait, Da'ish attacks on Shi'a mosques prompted displays of intra-sectarian unity and although the sectarianisation of political life has created exclusionary politics and the establishment of communitarian networks that transcend state borders, others have responded to questions of sectarian allegiance by stressing national identity.²⁴

While uncertainty is viewed by many with trepidation, it also remains a source of possibility. The existence of biopolitical modes of governance restrict the capacity for political expression and action, yet the regulation of life also creates zones of indistinction that can also be seen as zones of possibility. Although political, social and economic situations are bleak, residue of protest and resistance remains in the *nomos* and thus, the dreams of the Arab Uprisings remain. Demonstrations of political agency in the face of oppressive structural factors have been a common feature of the past decade as regimes attempt to retain sovereignty and the right to take life or let it live. As long as there is scope to express agency there is hope; and where there is hope, there is uncertainty and an imaginative geography of liberation, justice and dignity, effervescent in the minds of revolutionaries and documented in art, poetry and song.

Yet like the unity of *nomos*, such optimism is but a fleeting glance, eradicated in the minds of people as they are abandoned by the outside world. Dreams occur within the context of rampant authoritarianism – supported by Western powers – and seemingly unchecked efforts to restrict human agency, either through the regulation of life or through the subjugation of life to death. As we have seen, maintaining sovereign power is the ultimate goal of regimes, apparently regardless of the economic or human cost. Political contestation is a consequence of long-standing repression and marginalisation, a struggle to exert and control political agency that has transcended the borders of the sovereign state. Amid precarious conditions, political futures look bleak. As contestation escapes territorial borders, the fight for survival occurs within a broader struggle for regional supremacy where people are sacrificed in the name of political projects and, ultimately, regime survival.

Notes

- 1 Al Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution*.
- 2 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* [Lecture Series at the Collège de France, 1975–76] (D. Macey, trans.) (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 62.

- 3 'What Are the Political Attitudes of Citizens in Lebanon?' (*Arab Barometer*, 24.04.18), available at www.arabbarometer.org/2018/04/what-are-the-political-attitudes-of-citizens-in-lebanon (accessed 24.04.18).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 'The Concerns of Lebanese Citizens and Their Opinions About Politics' (*Arab Barometer*, 01.05.18), available at www.arabbarometer.org/2018/05/what-are-the-main-concerns-of-lebanese-citizens-what-are-their-opinions-about-politicians-political-participation (accessed 01.05.18).
- 6 Interview with Yemeni-Emirati student 2018.
- 7 Interview with Saudi academic, 2017.
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- 16 Interview with Syrian author, 2017.
- 17 Mabon, 'The World Is a Garden'.
- 18 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 90.
- 19 International Labour Organization, 'Rethinking Economic Growth'.
- 20 In Syria this was 56.5%, in Egypt 55% and in Yemen 31.6%.
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