

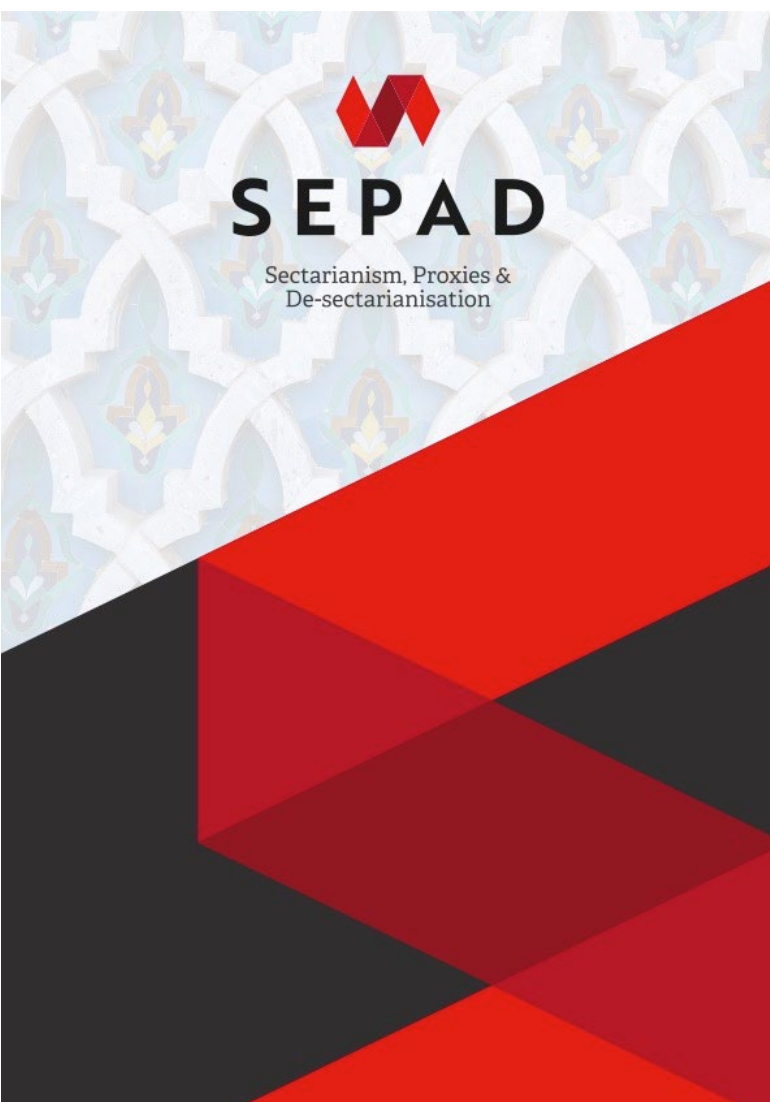
# The Arab Transformations WORKING PAPER SERIES

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**Sovereignty and its Discontents**

Editors:

Simon Mabon, University of Lancaster & Andrea Teti, University of Salerno





# SEPAD

## Abstract

This report brings together scholars from a range of disciplines to critically reflect on ideas of sovereignty and the state. This report draws on a workshop held at Lancaster University in the spring of 2023. We would like to thank all the participants in that workshop for their insightful engagement.

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## Table of Contents

Simon Mabon	<i>Sovereignty and the State</i>	5
Andrew Delatolla	<i>Colonialism and the State</i>	11
Hannes Baumann	<i>Sovereignty and international political economy: The Middle East's role in the uneven geography of money</i>	16
Guy Eyre	<i>Salafism and the state in Morocco: political quietism, da'wah, and the politics of purity</i>	23
Ruba Ali Al-Hassani	<i>Of emotion and existentialism: questioning sovereignty during genocide</i>	26
Andrea Teti	<i>Simulacra of Sovereignty and Statehood: The Biopolitics of Deferral, Simulation and Subalternity</i>	30
Gönenç Uysal	<i>The State and Exception: The Case of Turkey</i>	37

## Sovereignty and the State

*Simon Mabon*

*“We are at war with one another; a battlefield runs through the whole of society, continuously and permanently, and it is this battlefield that puts us all on one side or the other. There is no such thing as a neutral subject. We are all inevitably someone’s adversary” Foucault, Society Must Be Defended*

For Ibn Khaldun (1967), politics is fundamentally concerned with the “administration of home or city in accordance with ethical and philosophical requirements, for the purpose of directing the mass toward a behaviour that will result in the preservation and permanence of the (human) species”. Across global politics, the vehicle through which preservation and permanence is sought is typically the ‘sovereign state’, an entity that acts as the institutional mechanism for the regulation of life. While the central position of states within the post-WWII international order reflects the dominance and normalization of a particular historically specific mode of sovereignty – with entities deemed sovereign by virtue of territorial claims and external recognition – this mode fails to capture the essence of sovereignty in the global south.

In recent years, new configurations of sovereignty manifesting in political and cultural transformations push the debate away from territoriality and external recognition towards forms of violence and power. These configurations and demands have erupted repeatedly across recent years calling into question the relationship between state and sovereignty (Mabon, 2020a), and our broader understanding of the political more broadly.

Across the past century, states across the Middle East have been beset by a range of forms of violence and contestation including the emergence of ideological movements cutting across state borders, popular protests, and geopolitically charged conflict. In response to these challenges the state occupies a central role, shaping the nature of the political in the process through the ability to regulate life and in contestation over the state’s resources. Sovereign claims play a prominent role in much of this, serving as a biopolitical machinery that facilitates “the regulation of life within the context of (often violent) contestation, privileging and mobilizing sect-based identities as a form of self-preservation” (Mabon, 2019: 287; See also: Subramanian, 2019; Ismail, 2018; Dodge, 2019) whilst also providing an ideological vision to shape the future of political projects (Sen, 2020).

As Steven Heydemann and Emelie Chace-Donahue (2018) argue, in the past two decades political life across the Middle East has been shaped by a struggle to impose order, pitting competing claims to sovereignty against one another in a quest to dominate states and to regulate communal difference. For Heydemann and Chace-Donahue, this struggle gets at a fundamental tension over the nature of the political in the Middle East and the salience of the sovereign state over other forms of power and authority. In this struggle, claims to sovereign power are found in religion, tribe, ethnicity, economic capacity, authenticity, and other forms

of legitimacy, albeit conditioned by spatial contexts and the determining characteristics of states in which actors operate.

Ideas of statehood have historically been bound up in Weberian (1919) ideas about formal institutions, shaped by a distinction of state and society, and claims over a legitimate monopoly of the use of force. Despite the dominance of the neo-Weberian position (Skocpol, 1985), there are a range of problems with such an approach ranging from the binary and artificial distinction between state and society, the failure to adequately capture the dynamics of political life, and the ways in which power operates. Across the post-colonial world, states emerge from modernity in different ways, resulting in – and conditioned by – different claims of authority, legitimacy, knowledge and sovereignty. Indeed, their experiences with – and of – modernity differ dramatically, leading to different processes of state formation and state building across the global south.

A vast literature exists looking at the state in the Middle East, cutting across (sub)disciplinary borders in pursuit of a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which political organisation plays out (See: Ayubi, 1995; Delatolla, 2021; Nagle, 2022; Halliday, 2003). Although scholars such as Migdal (1998; 2012) and Mitchell (1999) have sought to move beyond the dichotomous state-society distinction – through state-in-society and state-effect respectively – more work is needed on the co-constitutive relationship between state and society which gives credence to agency, and ways in which power operates in formal and informal contexts. It is here where the concept of sovereignty offers valuable insight into understanding the regulation of life, allowing for analysis that includes both the formal aspects of state institutions to the informal rhythms of everyday life.

Across the Middle East, state power transcends formal institutions and is also intimately tied up in questions about order, (the absence of) violence, legitimacy, and the regulation of everyday life, necessitating a move beyond the Weberian model in pursuit of a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which power operates. Problems surrounding the Westphalian and Weberian approaches to the state are captured by the likes of Mahmood Mamdani, who observes that this model of the state fails to adequately capture the essence of political life, the relationship between rulers and ruled, between communal groups, and competing sources of authority in the post-colonial state. Moreover, as Mansour and Khatib (2021) observe, in cases such as Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, questions about the very existence of the state – *ma fi dawla* – have dominated political discourse.

As Talal Asad observes, the state “independently of the entire population, embodies sovereignty”. Yet this embodiment is conditioned by a range of issues and manifests in different ways, resulting in divergent manifestations of both state form and the mechanisms to regulate life, meaning that more nuanced awareness of the ways in which sovereignty operates is of paramount importance.

For Eric Lewis Beverley,

claims to sovereignty today often invoke historical or contemporary imperialism and older structures and idioms of solidarity. However, the fact that they are framed and understood in relation to the unitary nation state occludes the enduring importance of histories and idioms from before the mid-twentieth century. In this sense, sovereignty claims themselves gesture toward histories of real or imagined institutional and social networks of political autonomy. These contexts are typically disregarded or underplayed in analysis and scholarship or reduced to the flat tropes of return to a static historical past or teleological impossibilities” (2020: 408).

Debate about sovereignty features prominently in legal and political discussions about colonialism and decolonisation, amidst efforts to lay claim to sovereign rights, asserting self-determination, and territorial authority, yet as Beverley (2020) argues, these views typically reproduce a monistic, static, and colonial mode of thinking which ignore the histories and legacies of “diverse shades of sovereignty” and their impact on political life.

Some have pointed to ideas of hybrid sovereignty (Ramadan and Fregonese, 2017; Dodge, 2018) or nested sovereignty (Humphrey, 2004) in an effort to capture these dynamics, however, as Mansour and Khatib note, while hybridity can shed light on particular dynamics, such an approach “stops short of challenging the fundamental premise” about the viability of the neo-Weberian state/non-state model itself (2021:8), a point that also emerges in debate about nested sovereignties.

While conventional approaches to sovereignty are typically bound up in the (neo)Weberian tradition, critical approaches to discussions of sovereignty - such as that proposed by Giorgio Agamben (1998; 2005), Achille Mbembe (2019) or Michel Foucault (1971) - argue that sovereignty should be viewed through the biopolitical ability to control life, through a declaration of emergency legislation, letting life live, or abandoning life to death. Claims to - and forms of - sovereign power map onto states in different ways, creating contrasting forms of political organisation which, in turn, shape life in a range of ways. Where societies are deeply pluralistic – leading to contestation, conflict, and division – competing centres and forms of authority serve to further challenge the centralised, hierarchical form of sovereignty embodied by the Weberian model of both statehood and sovereignty.

For Critical Theorists working on politics in the global north, the state is the embodiment of sovereignty, the vehicle through which power over life emerges, albeit often under theorised. Yet questions emerge as to the application of these ideas in the post-colonial world, amidst pluralist societies when the state is eroded, opportunities arise for other actors to assert power and dominance and to shape life accordingly. In spaces shaped by the interaction of multiple forms of authority - also viewed as competing claims to sovereignty – the essence of political organisation is determined by the nature of the interplay between states and sovereignty, impacting on relations between rulers and ruled, and lines of inclusion/exclusion in the process. As a result, as Charles Tripp (2018) stresses, states are not fixed, static entities, but rather shaped and reshaped by the complexity and contingency of spatial contexts. Within this fluidity, the interplay between sovereignty and states shapes the rhythms of daily life in a range of ways including identity, political expression, electoral politics, institutional design, the economy, the role of religion, geopolitics, resistance, and violence.



Re-imagining the relationship between sovereignty and state can shed valuable insight into myriad aspects of contemporary politics, moving beyond a homogenous political geography which seeks to tie territoriality to a unitary mode of sovereign power. Escaping the trap of monistic forms of sovereignty is of paramount importance in better understanding the nature of the political and the manifestation of contemporary forms and modes of power.

In this report we seek to interrogate the ways in which state and sovereign power interact and shape space, along with the implications of this on lines of inclusion/exclusion. Bringing together scholars working on case studies across the Middle East, from different disciplinary backgrounds, this workshop seeks to better understand the ways in which sovereign power and the state interact, intellectually and empirically, with the aim of better understanding the nature of the political and how the rhythms of everyday life play out across space.

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## Colonialism and the State

*Andrew Delatolla*

The modern state as a concept is elusive; just when you think you have some formulation, some definition, or some working theoretical grounding, the rug is pulled out from under you. My own journey in trying to ‘deal’ with – or make sense of – the state began with the teachings of the late Kym Pruesse, an activist, artist, and professor at OCAD in Toronto. It was the first time I was encouraged to think about how the state seeks to preserve the politics of respectability, in society and the halls of state institutions. Here, it is possible to cite Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (2019), an important rumination on the state’s tools and practices for maintaining *civilité* (1985). In doing so, it is evident how the violence of the colonial state ‘boomeranged’ back to the metropolises to give way to the modern Western state. Importantly, however, the colony as testing ground continues to differentiate the colonial state from the modern Western state. The colonies, including contemporary colonial configurations such as Israel’s occupation of Palestine, and Spanish Ceuta and Melilla, were and continue to be testing sites for new methods and means of population control, that then become policy, sold to the masses as progress and civilization, in the modern state. Notably, another distinction is that colonial powers do not govern native populations with the aim to ensure that they represent the colonial nation’s benchmark of civilisation. Instead, these native populations are in service to the colonial power and their lives are not respected as they may be in the metropolitan citizens. Within these colonial configurations where colonised populations are treated differently, examples include the divergence in treatment between indigenous populations around the world, including the USA, Canada, Australia and South Africa (Yao and Delatolla, 2021), Palestinians and Israelis, with the latter example being subjected to heightened forms of militarized policing, extrajudicial killing, and surveillance by the Israeli state and its institutions (Puar, 2017).

When viewed through this vector, the state is a container to assert control over its population. This does not veer too far from Weber’s checklist of what a state is: a territory, a monopoly of (legitimate) force, a government, and a population (2004). However, the state, even with its most legitimate and democratic institutions and structures applies different forms of violence to assert control, to ensure *civilité*, and to enable the comfortable maintenance of the bourgeoisie. Delving into these dynamics, Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* can be pushed further: the state can also be understood as a killing machine. Its creation in the Middle East and North Africa centred on creating containers to enable extraction and exploitation for the benefit of European metropolises, justified by racist notions of civilizational hierarchies (Delatolla, 2021).

These arguments can also interact and build on Agamben’s ideas outlined in the *State of Exception* and, relatedly, Mbembe’s arguments on colonialism and the postcolony (2005).

Where Agamben argues that exceptions to standard practices of governance exist – often directed onto undesirable bodies, as was the case with the so called ‘War on Terror’, Mbembe argues that the state of exception was used to justify violence and killing against people who, in one way or another, are not valued as people but are reducible to their utility.

If we are to understand the foundations of the modern state in the Middle East and North Africa as being the result of colonial institution building and governance, then it makes sense that the institutions and structures of the post-independence ‘post-colonial’ state reflect the forms of extraction and violence of the previous era; despite decades of revolutions, coup d’états, and international attempts at contemporary development and statebuilding. By examining the post-colonial state through this lens, two questions emerge: 1) why this is the case and 2) how have these institutions and structures of the colonial state system remained? The answer to these questions can be found in the political continuities of the international system which offers an overarching structure that is maintained by the trans-historical interests of the most powerful states. Although much scholarship, historical and political, temporally divides political history into different eras, producing discursive and intellectual ruptures that, in turn, reflect the theoretical frameworks used to explain historical and political phenomenon, it is, I argue, unhelpful in trying to answer questions concerning statehood. As such, when answering the above questions, we need to understand how institutions and structures were built on and from colonial policies and practices of scorched earth; transforming societies to fulfil an economic and political purpose that benefitted those wielding violence; including foreign colonisers and local native elites that worked closely with oppressive forces.

By understanding the post-colonial state as being tethered to the colonial state, despite declarations of independence and subsequent political upheavals and transformations in many of these states, it becomes evident that the institutions and structures that were crucial to colonial governance were never destroyed. Instead, practices of colonial governance and colonial institutions were often seen by new leaders as necessary to retain power and control by the incoming political elites. Here, the international system and states at the helm of maintaining the system can be viewed as kingmakers, more concerned with the status quo than providing space for a new political project. Indeed, there are many instances where key international players have allowed new elites to fall, and – at times – actively enabled their fall in fear of disruptive and novel political projects. From this argument, the example of Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddegh in Iran and, more recently, the international silence regarding the President Al-Sisi’s coup against President Mohamed Morsi, can be understood.

By viewing the post-colonial state as embedded and tethered to colonial histories, consistently enmeshed in an international system of interests that, arguably, have not changed much since the late nineteenth century, it is possible to highlight key continuities that expose an ongoing form of colonial violence. When examining the case of Egypt, for example, a state that had experienced European colonialism and empire with the French occupation from 1798-1801 and the British occupation from 1882 under a veiled protectorate, it is possible to understand the impact of European colonialism and empire by looking at physical space, as Timothy Mitchell (1991) does, the military, and the law. While under the legal and political purview of the Ottoman Empire, the Othman Penal Code of 1858 was applied in Egypt. The Othman Penal

Code of 1858 had been influenced by the French Code of 1810 and by the French Penal Code of 1837. Subsequently, Lord Kitchener, a British Colonial Administrator, ordered a review of the Egyptian 1909 Penal Code, leading to the Draft Penal Code of 1919, being passed in Parliament in 1937. Although the code has been since amended, much of the language and structure remains in place (Human Rights Watch, 2004). These laws frame governmentality, providing the scope of the government to discipline and punish citizens in a manner that better reflects the positionalities of French, and later, British ideas of *civilité*, or civilized behaviour.

French and British influence on the legal parameters of the development of the modern and modernising Egyptian state reflected European desires to instil civilized behaviour. This occurred with the addition of racial-biological determinism that placed Egyptians and Egyptian society in a lower hierarchical place in relation to the French and British; requiring systems of governance that necessitated strength over leniency to create the moral, civilized, and modern society required for independence. Part of this notion of *civilité* that was embedded in colonial governance was a form of heterocolonialism that gave way to new, restrictive, and heteronormative forms of sexual governance (Delatolla, 2021a). The degradation and subsequent elimination of perceived non-masculine behaviours and same-sex relations was bound up in European ideas of civilized engagement that were supported through increased medical and legal developments. In Egypt, this included the elimination of the *khawal*, a male dancer dressed in feminine attire. This is not to say that conservative attitudes, particularly among rural and religious communities, did not exist and were not opposed to such social practices. Instead, it is to highlight the expressions, categories, and framings used today are distinctly modern, often originating in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, with the social, political, and subsequently legal enforcement that can be characterised as heterocoloniality, a form of violence was enacted and embedded into the state, requiring the elimination of non-heteronormative performances and acts. Central to this form of heterocoloniality, the state's relationship to sex and sexuality existed relative to biological constructions of gender that stripped women of their right to be political and economic agents. This was evident in Egypt, as in other former colonies, including Algeria, Lebanon, and Syria. In Algeria, pre-independence, French colonisation has been attributed to the decimation of women's engagement in economic activities, including traditional handicraft. During the struggles for independence, women were required to fight for national independence but not make political demands regarding their place within an independent nation-state.<sup>2</sup> For many, including women and those that did not fit within a colonial heteronormative framing of civilized engagement, the colonial state and the independent modern state, has continuously

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<sup>1</sup> While Joseph Massad makes a similar argument, I have argued and continue to argue that the concern is not with modern categories of the homosexual or the LGBTQ+ but with the foundational category of heterosexuality and the heterosexual as a point of departure for thinking about other sexualities and sexual orientations. As such, it is not the 'gay international' that imposes a colonial ordering, but the 'straight international' that needs to be abolished.

<sup>2</sup> See the volume edited by Margaret Meriwether and Judith Tucker, 2019, *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*. Taylor and Francis.

sought a politics of civilization and respectability to do with citizenship based on ideas of masculinity and hetero-social reproduction.

Following the Free Officer coup d'état in 1952 Egypt, a penal code based on anti-colonial principles was enacted. While valiant in its attempt to strip out the vestiges of British and French influence, the state, its institutions – including its army, and its law remained embedded in a hetero-colonial system. That is not to say that there was not a re-imagining of politics, but that the anti-colonial politics that were developing in this moment relied on a colonial framing of statehood. Unlike the establishment of colonial institutions and structures, the anti-colonial movement did not enact a policy of scorched earth. While propositions of a new political formations were developed in anti-colonial movements, the foundations of the colonial state, including the military and law, remained.

Despite the state gained its independence, its patriarchal and heteronormative structures of colonial governance remained intact. Although the state is not solely the result of patriarchy and heteronormativity, it is through this lens that makes visible the 'state of exception' enacted on particular communities under laws concerned with debauchery and immorality. Furthermore, it is through these legal articles that, the creation of the state of exception, that violence and, indeed, killing occurs.

Indeed, it is helpful to view the state as a container, but then the question that requires answering is: a container for what purpose? And, more importantly, for who? The purpose of the state is, arguably to organise populations into productive roles in capitalist systems and take on the responsibility to protect those populations from threats of violence and harm. Although this appears as a sound trade-off, when questioning who this trade-off is for, we can better understand the limited application of the state as a form of safety and security. In turn, statehood becomes a source of violence and death that cannot be unseen when examined through the spectre of a politics of respectability, *civilité*, and belonging – bringing to the fore a harsh reality of constant state of exception that not only seeks to discipline and punish, but to eliminate.

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## **Sovereignty and international political economy: The Middle East's role in the uneven geography of money**

*Hannes Baumann*

Sovereignty concerns not just security but also economy. One of the essential sovereign functions of a state is to mint its “national” currency. As Benjamin Cohen (Cohen, 1998) has noted, the supposed equality of currencies in the international arena is a myth: While the US dollar is widely accepted for payment across the world, there are other states where even their own citizens no longer trust their domestic currency enough to use it for day-to-day transactions. Meanwhile, most states’ currencies will be placed somewhere along this continuum.

The states of the Middle East are deeply implicated in this “uneven geography of money” (Cohen, 1998). Since the 1970s, Gulf oil states have emerged as key players in the making of the global currency hierarchies. The recycling of petrodollar surpluses played a crucial role in cementing US dollar hegemony after the abandonment of the gold standard in the 1970s. The Middle East is also an arena for the exercise of coercive “monetary power” (Kirshner, 1995): US sanctions have curtailed Iranian access to the global financial system, a feat made possible by the dominance of the US dollar. Meanwhile, many regional countries are struggling to maintain the values of their currencies. A drop in value erodes citizens’ power to purchase the imported goods the country depends on – and is thus a threat to political stability. Since the start of the Arab uprisings in 2011, “monetary power” has therefore become an important part of the toolbox of counter-revolutionary statecraft by Gulf Arab monarchies: In moments of economic and political peril, they bolster allies through timely injections of US dollars, propping up their clients’ failing currencies.

### **Gulf petro-dollar recycling and the making of US dollar hegemony**

After World War II, the US dollar cemented its role as the world’s preferred reserve currency, having replaced sterling. The dollar’s “exorbitant privilege” (Eichengreen, 2011) seemed momentarily imperilled in the early 1970s, when Washington was forced to abandon the gold standard. The world entered the post-gold era of floating currencies and Washington was keen to assert the dollar’s status as the world’s favourite money.

The transformation of the global monetary system coincided with a shift in the balance of power from great-power oil consumers to oil producers in the Global South – including Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) became the institutional expression of this newfound power. David Spiro (Spiro, 1999) traced how the way petrodollars were recycled supported the making of US dollar hegemony. Tacit agreements between the US and Saudi Arabia channelled the kingdom’s petrodollars into American treasury bonds. Saudi oil income thus helped finance American deficits. Furthermore, Saudi

Arabia agreed to lobby OPEC to keep oil priced in US dollars. Spiro (1999, p. 121-122) describes the advantage of this for the US as a “double loan”. Firstly, the US “government could print dollars to pay for oil, and the American economy did not have to produce foods and services in exchange for the oil until OPEC used the dollars for goods and services” – a strategy which would not work if oil were priced in a currency other than the dollar. Secondly, all other countries “had to pay dollars for oil but could not print currency”, forcing them to trade their goods and services for dollar before being able to buy oil. Saudi Arabia thus influenced quite fundamental functions of the American state, including raising debt and maintaining the global predominance of its currency.

The oil boom of from 2001 until 2014 revived an interest in the role of Gulf oil monarchies’ surpluses propping up the US dollar. Momani (Momani, 2008) argues Gulf influence has dissipated somewhat, as global oil markets are unlikely to simply switch their pricing into currencies other than the US dollar and Gulf investment has diversified away from “conservative” investments such as US treasury bonds. Interviewing financial elites in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Otero-Iglesias and Steinberg found that they remained inclined to keep their foreign currency reserves in US dollars, not least due to continued American security guarantees for the Gulf monarchies (Otero-Iglesias & Steinberg, 2013).

And yet US policy makers and pundits experience recurring bouts of anxiety about “America’s superpower” to print a currency the rest of the world economy is happy to soak up (Zakaria, 2023). Others find these threats to the dollar’s role overblown, not least because China’s yuan remains a less attractive alternative while capital controls are in place and Chinese capital markets remain under-developed (FT editorial board, 2023). Again, the Gulf states feature heavily in this discussion about the future of dollar hegemony. Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been displaying greater independence from United States foreign policy than has traditionally been the case. The kingdom not only defied American wishes on issues such as the Ukraine war and oil policy, but also flirted with increasing the use of “petroyuan” – settling oil bills in Chinese currency (Said & Kalin, 2022).

## **Iran sanctions as coercive monetary power**

The Middle East has become a site for the exercise of American “monetary power”, the use of international monetary relations as an instrument of coercive power (Kirshner, 1995). A classic example of the use of monetary power was the Suez war of 1956. The British collusion with France and Israel did not fail because of military defeat but because the United States refused to prop up the value of the pound, which had come under sustained pressure. America’s ability to coerce states through monetary relations includes its ability to curtail a foe’s access to the dollar, the lifeblood of global economic transactions. More recently, the efficacy of American-led sanctions to punish Russia’s invasion of Ukraine relied in no small part on the ability to deny Moscow access to US dollars (Wolf, 2022).

This extreme form of financial sanctions had previously been trialled in the Middle East. The United States put Iran under sanctions soon after the 1979 revolution. The administration of George W. Bush then stepped up sanctions with a campaign aimed at isolating Iran from the global financial system (Arnold, 2016). In 2006 the Treasury lobbied private banks, making it

clear that dealing with Iranian financial entities would represent a reputational risk. They also started blacklisting Iranian banks. In 2008, it closed a loophole that allowed US banks to act as intermediaries to facilitate transactions between foreign banks acting on behalf of Iranian clients.

The Obama administration further tightened the screws. This was the stick to entice Iran to accept the carrot of a nuclear agreement, which was eventually concluded between the P5+1 and Iran in 2015. In 2010, Congress passed the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), which would freeze foreign banks out of the US financial system if found to be falling foul of financial sanctions against Iran. European Union sanctions were also tightened. In 2012 Iran was excluded from the SWIFT payment system, which cut the country out of the standard secure messaging system used in global financial transactions. These efforts to freeze Iran out of the global financial system worked. Iran lost access to many frozen overseas accounts, foreign currency reserves dwindled, the value of the rial dropped (Arnold, 2016, p. 87).

These financial sanctions could only succeed because of the role of the dollar in global trade and as a reserve currency. Not only American banks were facing the threat of falling foul of their own government's rules, but European and other global banks were also fearful of incurring Washington's wrath. The risk of dealing with Iran was simply too great.

The US lifted many of its sanctions on Iran after the signing of the nuclear accord in 2015. Donald Trump then reinstated sanctions when he withdrew from the agreement in 2018. These sanctions have had an effect beyond Iran's borders, also affecting neighbouring countries. Dubai's traders and banks feared that they would fall foul of American restrictions, given that the city had become an important commercial window to the world for Iran (Khalid & Torchia, 2018). Lebanon's banks became nervous because Hizballah's close links to Tehran were exposing this crucial economic sector to America's wrath (Barrington & Francis, 2019). In Iraq, access to US dollars has been regulated by the US Federal Reserve, which supplies Baghdad's central banks with US currency for daily "dollar auctions" (Jalabi, 2023). The arrangement is a remnant of the American-led invasion in 2003. After suspicion that some of this dollar flow was seeping into the hands of Iran and its local proxies, the US closed the spigot. Iraq is now suffering from a severe shortage of US dollars, hampering trade and commerce in a country that has come to rely on the greenback for a wide range of transactions.

### **Protective currency manipulation: Gulf deposits to bolster allies' currencies**

Financial globalisation gathered pace in the 1980s and was largely completed in the 1990s as states dismantled capital controls. The end of the "embedded liberalism" (Ruggie, 1982) of the Bretton Woods era meant states found it increasingly difficult to manage exchange rates. If "hot money" was free to flow in and out of the country unimpeded, then sudden outflows would see the value of a country's currency plummet. The economic managers of states – particularly in the Global South – became extremely concerned with displaying macro-economic propriety in line with the "Washington Consensus": fiscal prudence, trade and investment openness, and much-reduced state expenditure. One signal of such propriety, and a symbol of good macro-economic management, was currency stability itself. Currency stability also has a domestic

political function. Many Middle Eastern countries remained dependent on imports of essential goods including food, and often also oil. A drop in the value of the domestic currency would immediately erode the purchasing power of populations already under economic stress from repeated bouts of neoliberal austerity policies.

Currency volatility and especially the plummeting value of a currency thus carry great political risk. The risk is relatively slight for the oil-rich Gulf Arab monarchies who manage to keep their currencies pegged to the US dollar.<sup>3</sup> Resource-poor Arab states, meanwhile, fret over the possibility of sudden devaluations. The ability to prop up the currencies of their poorer Arab brethren has thus become a frequent instrument of Gulf states' "economic statecraft" (Young, 2023) in the region.

One of the most prominent instances of Gulf states' "monetary power" was Lebanon's currency peg. Between 1997 and 2019 the dollar and the Lebanese lira were used interchangeably in everyday transactions at a fixed rate. Lebanon maintained the peg against the odds and in the face of persistent current account and budget deficits, leading to one of the highest debt-to-GDP ratios in the world (Baumann, 2021). Gulf "monetary power" was a crucial factor that allowed the Lebanese central bank to defy economic gravity for so long.

The wealthy Lebanese diaspora and also other wealthy Arabs would deposit their wealth in Lebanese banks, earning high interest rates and thus financing the country's current account deficit. The banks were lending to the government, which in turn paid eye-watering interest rates. Any profits made in Lebanese currency were convertible into US dollars at a fixed rate. How was confidence maintained in the face of ballooning debt? An International Monetary Fund (IMF) working paper from 2008 tried to solve the mystery by asking investors in Lebanese debt (Schimmelpfennig & Gardner, 2008). Firstly, Lebanon had never defaulted. Secondly, the government was borrowing from local banks rather than having to rely on international lenders, who might go cold on them. The banks, meanwhile, relied on Lebanon's wealthy diaspora as a "dedicated" investor base.

The crucial point with regard to monetary power is the third reason for investor confidence: Investors were relying on an "implicit guarantee" from "donors". Who these donors were becomes clear if we look at the moments when Lebanon's financial position seemed most perilous. In 2006 Israel engaged in a month-long war with Lebanon after Hizballah had seized two Israeli soldiers. In order to reassure investors, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia deposited a combined \$1.5 billion in Lebanon's central bank. The deposits were a very public display of support meant to reassure investors that Lebanon's Gulf partners would dip into their deep pockets to support the country's financial position. In the event, withdrawals stayed at a manageable level and the peg was maintained. This was not the only instance of Gulf deposits propping up the Lebanese currency: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates had put a combined \$800 million into Beirut's central bank in 1998, followed by another \$100 million from Kuwait in 2001.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Kuwait, which pegs the dinar to a basket of currencies.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Middle East Economic Survey, various issues.

The conspicuous depositing of US dollars in other Arab states' central banks is part of the Gulf states "economic statecraft" (Young, 2023). While Lebanon had been an early testing ground for this use of "monetary power", this way of propping up weak currencies of political allies exploded after the onset of the Arab uprisings in 2011. Gulf monarchies were expanding their aid, investment, but also dollar deposits into central banks in order to influence the politics of countries in uproar. The biggest recipient of deposits was Egypt, which became a battle ground of rival Gulf visions for the future of the region. Between 2012 and 2022, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia deposited a combined \$27 billion into Cairo's central bank.<sup>5</sup> An initial Qatari deposit was paid in under the Muslim Brotherhood Muhammad Mursi's presidency but was repaid after the 2013 coup against the Brotherhood, replaced by competing inflows from Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Saleh, 2013). While Doha had seen the Muslim Brotherhood as a welcome partner in its bid for regional influence, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi regarded the movement a threat to its regional control. Monetary power in the shape of deposits to central banks became a weapon in this tussle over the future of Arab politics.

Egypt was the largest recipient of central bank deposits from the Gulf but it was not alone. Other countries which received such support in the wake of the uprisings were Jordan, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen.<sup>6</sup> The aim was to prop up friendly autocratic regimes such as Jordan or war-torn Yemen, or to curry favour with incoming governments in Sudan or Tunisia. Beyond the Arab world, Turkey has benefited from currency swaps with Qatar which helped it manage the weakening lira (Kucukgocmen & Coskun, 2020), while Pakistan has benefited from Saudi support (Al-Atrush & Bokhari, 2022). Monetary power has become a commonly used tool of post-Arab uprising Gulf statecraft.

### **The future geography of money**

Sovereignty is always something of an illusion, but it is particularly tenuous when it comes to currencies. The Middle East has been at the forefront of several different dynamics of uneven monetary geography – global dollar hegemony, the local effects of US sanctions, or the regional exercise of Gulf "monetary power" through conspicuous deposits in central banks.

The future dynamics of money are in flux. Gulf oil states' commitment to dollar hegemony seems to be less assured. The declining dominance of the greenback would also undermine the efficacy of financial sanctions Washington may level against opponents in the Middle East, as it did towards Iran. The future influence of Gulf states on global currency dynamics is itself in doubt as the global economy is decarbonising and the monarchies need to adapt to a post-oil world. At a regional level, Gulf states' use of monetary power through deposits to central banks is likely to remain a useful gauge of regional political dynamics.

The study of Middle Eastern currencies can also address the absence of the region in scholarship on international political economy (IPE) (Snider, 2017; Baumann, 2021; Baumann & Roccu, 2023). The use of monetary power as an instrument of Gulf countries' economic

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Middle East Economic Survey, various issues.

<sup>6</sup> According to the Middle East Economic Survey, various issues.

statecraft is not only “bringing the Middle East” into IPE by expanding the universe of cases but can also help theorise and refine the concept.

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## Salafism and the state in Morocco: political quietism, *da'wah*, and the politics of purity

Guy Eyre

Salafism is one of the most influential contemporary Islamic ideologies (Bano, 2021: 3). It can be described as a scripturalist, literalist, fundamentalist, transnational Sunni Islamic movement centred on a particular conception of *tawhid*, or God's oneness, and thus complete submission to God. It stresses a return to the authentic beliefs and practices of the first three generations of Muslims – *al-salaf al-salih* ('pious ancestors'). Salafis also reject the canonical Sunni Islamic schools of law (a position known as anti-Madhabism), and instead urge a strict interpretation of the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* (the path or example of the Prophet). They argue that in rigorously abiding by the guidance and rules in the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* on their understanding of the *hadiths*, they eliminate the biases of human subjectivity and self-interest to identify the singular truth of God's commands. In this way, they underscore a particular mode of textual interpretation stressing an 'unmediated' interface with the principal texts of Islam. This means that, unlike traditional and pre-modern Muslims, Salafis reject a developed and 'more layered' scholastic tradition of religious interpretation, which otherwise constrains and regulates, in rigorous fashion, the output of opinions' (Haykel, 2009). Their call for a strict 'constructionist' reading of *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* results in a rejection of the possibility of doctrinal difference (with the exception of a few limited circumstances). Along these lines, Salafism therefore encompasses a wide range of additional practices, including the rejection of both *shirk* (or polytheism) and *bida'h* (association of God with other beings or things) in keeping with other sectarian and sub-sectarian dogmatists. The denunciation of Shi'a for their purported infidelity is also common amongst Salafis, who rail against Sufis too, criticising their practices of grave visitation and various rituals they consider contrary to Islam's creed.

Arguably the central dilemma of Salafis is their relationship to modern institutional politics and state institutions (Meijer, 2012). Can they still adhere to the 'pure' fundamentals of God's injunctions and thus pursue a rigorous doctrine of *tawhid*, or complete submission to God, and simultaneously (i) acquiesce to the 'secular' political power of the modern state where rulers do not impose (strict) Islamic law (*shari'ah*) and (ii) participate in institutional and contentious politics by competing and compromising with political adversaries they consider to 'deviate' (*inharif*) from 'pure' Islam? Should they focus solely on *da'wah* (spreading the faith) and *tarbiyya* (education) to form a purified, 'authentic' Muslim community? Or should they criticise incumbent rulers for failing to implement 'true' *shari'ah* and so undertake oppositional modes of politics? Or should they revolt (Meijer, 2012: 28)?

There is considerable intra-Salafi disagreement over how to best respond to this conundrum. One Salafi sub-group, known as Salafi-jihadis, support the use of violence with the specific goal of unseating incumbent regimes (via 'revolutionary' and/or 'global' jihad (Wagemakers, 2016). Elsewhere, political Salafis reject Salafi-jihadis' use of violence against regimes and



Western targets. Instead, politicians participate in parliamentary politics or, where they do not or indeed are prevented from doing so, they instead undertake ‘contentious political debate, activism, and set out their views on how the country should be run through letters, organizations, and petitions’ (Ibid.).

My research in Morocco, however, focuses on a third mode of Salafism, known as quietism. By far the largest sub-type of Salafism worldwide and in many ways the true heart and ideal-type of the movement, quietists avow obedience to incumbent regimes and stay aloof from, or refrain from, actively participating in institutional and oppositional politics (Wagemakers, 2016: 30). They focus instead on religious education and preaching. In Morocco, this quietist mode of Salafism emerged in the 1970s, as a result of the activism of Muhammad Taqi al-Din Abd al-Qader al-Hilali (d. 1987) and his protégé, al-Maghraoui. In 1976, Maghraoui founded what would become the largest and most prominent Salafi group in Morocco, the quietist Dor al-Qur’an association in Marrakech.

What, then, is the relationship between these Salafi quietists and sovereign state power in Morocco? Prima facie, given these Salafis’ rejection of institutional and oppositional politics and, more broadly, their claim to ‘not do politics’, we might consider them pre-political, even apolitical, actors. However, as scholars acknowledge, they still do politics: they act within political contexts (Meijer, 2016: 436) and proffer advice and obedience to regimes (Wagemakers, 2016). In this way, their strict loyalism vis-à-vis the Moroccan monarchy means that they constitute (potential) political – albeit highly unequal – partners of state power. After all, they typically urge Moroccans to abide by Islamic rulings, such as *Wali al-Amr* (the Legal Guardian), that enjoin Muslims to safeguard national security by remaining entirely loyal to the political ruler. Such injunctions, quietist Salafis argue, forbid Moroccans from engaging in any practices – including violence and protests – that might undermine security in the country and, in doing so, arguably reinforce the state’s own political authority (Tozy, 2009; Wehrey and Boukhars, 2019). Furthermore, these Salafis are typically characterized by their claim to a monopoly over Islamic ‘authenticity’, which they contend is the key to salvation. Accordingly, they typically distinguish themselves as ‘purer’ and ‘more authentic’ than other Islamic groups, such as the Moroccan Islamist ‘Party of Justice and Development’. In doing so, they inveigh against these competitors for the fact that these groups have been side-tracked into focusing on a wrong-headed conception of power consists in countering and grappling with the state. As a result, whilst the Moroccan state has repressed quietist Salafis – particularly since the 2003 Casablanca bombings, perpetrated by jihadi-Salafis – and attempted to limit their religious activism, it largely tolerates them and permits their religious activism, albeit within strict limits, because it broadly considers them a pro-status quo trend useful in confronting new domestic challenges from the Islamist (and, in the 1980s, Leftist) sectors (Aboullouz, 2009).

Nonetheless, quietist Salafis in Morocco would also appear to pose a challenge to sovereign state power. After all, their ideas and practice are focused on establishing a ‘pure’, ‘authentic’ moral Islamic community that transcends Morocco’s national borders. As such, they can be seen as propounding notions of communal belonging and Muslim identity focused on the global *umma* and rooted in religious purity. This approach therefore diverges from, and indeed opposes, the legitimacy of the territorial national community promulgated by the Moroccan

state. Put simply, quietist Salafis ultimately believe the regime erroneously seeks to tie the loyalty of citizens to the national, rather than global Muslim, community. Furthermore, through their exclusivist claims to represent ‘authentic’ Islam, quietist Salafis defy the claims of the Moroccan palace and its official Islamic institutions to hold ultimate religious authority within the kingdom. By spreading their approach to Islam through religious education and preaching in local Moroccan neighbourhoods, they therefore undercut the state’s claims (and, arguably, its ability) to shape ‘its’ citizens in its own image. Additionally, their long-standing and iconoclastic rejection of the canonical schools of Islamic jurisprudence challenges the state’s own attempt, particularly since 2003, to promulgate an official ‘moderate’, ‘Maliki’, notion of “Moroccan Islam” that explicitly seeks to undercut Salafī religiosity.

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## Of emotion and existentialism: questioning sovereignty during genocide

*Ruba Ali Al-Hassani*

In late June 2004, the occupying US force in Iraq “handed over” sovereignty to the newly installed Iraqi Governing Council, leaving me forever contemplative about the concept of sovereignty. What is this tangible form of sovereignty that can be handed over by an occupying force? What does it mean to hand it over after invading and committing crimes in a country once deemed sovereign, despite the violation of its people’s fundamental rights by both national and international bodies? What does it mean to maintain interventionism in a country to whom one has “handed over” sovereignty? Similar questions troubled me recently in light of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. In a recent interview (Novara Media, 2023), Rashid al-Khalidi stated that Palestinians were never “offered” sovereignty or a “fully independent, viable, continuous Palestinian state by any Israeli leader or by the United States. They were offered, however, autonomy under overall Israeli sovereignty and Israeli security control”. The same image of “handing over” sovereignty played in my mind. In both contexts, sovereignty sounds like something to be gifted or bestowed; a privilege granted by a superior, external power that claims authority through no direct relation to, or respect for, the people who have lived on the land for generations.

Indeed, the post-Westphalian understanding of sovereignty is rooted in this power dynamic. Former colonialist powers divided their colonies and “granted” them sovereignty, which would be regulated by a body of international law that upholds a set of myths surrounding European omnipotence and truths necessary to order their own existence and that of others (Al Attar, 2023). Academics in both the Political Sciences and International Law have taught their own versions of the mythology of International Law and its liberal values. Some academics have painted International Law as an apolitical moral compass while those in the Political Sciences and International Relations approach International Law as both a tool of politicking and maintaining order. I have listened to academics in these different disciplines explore sovereignty, and after much reflection on the current genocide in Gaza, I am now convinced that sovereignty, in itself, is a concept weaponized to order and maintain European and Western hegemony over the global majority. Sovereignty is an emotional and rhetorical construct weaponized to maintain order according to a subjective perspective of the world.

Twenty years ago, Radon (2004) argued that sovereignty is a political emotion, referring to many different belief systems over time. While it maintains relevance over time functionally as an organizing principle, and politically as a symbol of national self-identity, it motivates political mobilization towards recognition and legislation. Sovereignty is thus not an objective fact, contrary to what International Law and its purveyors claim. It is an emotion reflecting beliefs of not only nationhood, but also ideologies that maintain a form of exceptionalism distinguishing not only a nation, but also a region, from another. In defence of Radon’s argument that sovereignty is a political emotion from critics who treat emotion as “irrational



# SEPAD

fluff”, I return to Theodore Kemper’s Structural Theory of Emotion. Kemper defines structural emotions “...as those that result from a relatively stable power-status relationship. This is not to say that such structures are frozen. Ongoing interaction will result in immediate outcomes that will tip the structure in one direction or another, but these will often be slight and only transient changes” (Kemper, 2006, 97). Kemper argues that emotion results immediately from ongoing interaction in power-status terms within structures—socio-political or otherwise. Social and other forms of mobilisation, thus, are emotional responses to structural issues where power dynamics promote the ascendancy of one party over another, aiming to change them. When the United States “handed over” sovereignty to Iraqis in 2004, it decided that Iraqis are now *allowed* to feel independent, but with contingencies. When Israel did not “offer” sovereignty to Palestinians during their long history of negotiations, it refused to *allow* them to feel like a nation united and imposed contingencies for a weak and managed sense of autonomy under Israeli control. Sovereignty, and its surrounding dynamics, are all about emotion and subjectivity.

As the global solidarity with Palestine movement grows, various questions emerge around sovereignty and the structures put into place to protect its subjectivity in International Law. Why is it that some countries are allowed to draw and expand their borders, while others cannot? Who has the right to defend their land and peoples, and who does not? Who is allowed to violate established international norms and who is not? Whose emotions must be protected on account of free speech, and whose emotions must be violated in the name of free speech? Where do we draw the line between national and popular sovereignty, and where do they overlap? Can a state be sovereign if its people are not? Can a people’s rights be protected if they are not recognized as a sovereign state? Most importantly, who dominates the narrative around sovereignty, and what language is “best” to maintain this narrative? In fact, who decides what language is “best” for narratives around sovereignty?

The social and emotional construct that is sovereignty is shaped by the rhetoric used to justify it in legal and political form. Rhetorical sovereignty emerged in the last two decades as an “ideal principle”, the “beacon” by which peoples seek the paths to agency, power, and community (Lyons, 2000, 449). It is the “inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires...to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (*ibid*). This type of sovereignty is a direct response to rhetorical imperialism or “the ability of dominant powers to assert control of others by setting the terms of debate” (*ibid*). The terms of rhetorical imperialism, according to Lyons (2000, 453), are definitional, for they “identify the parties discussed by describing them in certain ways” (*ibid*). I would argue that rhetorical sovereignty is also emotional, as it defends the “inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires...to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (*ibid*). This type of sovereignty is about the story being told, its analysis/interpretation, the language and tone used, the parties involved...and its reception. When the words of the global solidarity with Palestine movement are policed and now criminalized in some Western states, a response is natural. Rhetorical sovereignty over a nation’s right to self-defence and to exist begs the question, “On account of whom?” A global movement is asking important questions

around the extent to which a government's sovereignty is sacred and why a people's sovereignty is repeatedly denied.

In a recent interview (Fresh Squeezed! The Opinio Juris Podcast, n.d.), Noura Erakat discussed the rhetorical trap that revolves around Western notions of statehood and sovereignty. To deviate from post-Westphalian notions of statehood and sovereignty, we still refer to them as a starting point of comparison; there is no escaping that, even if we try to begin elsewhere. This is akin to how Third World Approaches of International Law orbit around Eurocentric international legal theory to challenge it (Al Attar, 2022; 2020; 2021). Rhetoric may sometimes feel like endless circling, and this is exactly how I feel about conversations around sovereignty. Much is being published on the subject, and challenges are proposed...but where do they begin? In the same interview, Erakat explained a “sovereignty trap” in which Palestinians find themselves, where they need Israel's recognition of their sovereignty in order to gain it. This applies to colonized peoples all around the world—from Turtle Island to Oceania. To truly feel sovereign, one needs others to recognize it. If we consider this from the perspective that sovereignty is a political emotion, this dynamic resembles gaslighting in a relationship. One's emotions are not recognized, and in fact, denied and reshaped through power and status-infused manipulation. If it is not recognized, it is treated as unreal and non-existent.

On a similar note, a question arises in every conversation about colonizer-vs-indigenous sovereignty: “If these people are indeed indigenous, at what point in history did they have sovereignty?” If we are to follow the post-Westphalian understanding of sovereignty, no one and nothing would pre-exist the fragile sovereignty of colonialist empires. This means the complete erasure not only of peoples, but of history in its entirety, to maintain a fragile sense of sovereignty whose existence relies on this erasure. To interrogate and challenge this erasure of history, our approach to sovereignty must change. Legal and political rhetoric and pedagogy must change. The law—international law from which post-Westphalian sovereignty emerged—has always been transactional, wielded by those in power to their advantage. It preserves the status quo, privileging certain actors over others, and we see this in international courts that prosecute only certain governments, but not others for war crimes. International Law's “historical contingency combines with its structural logic to adumbrate a reality that some live and that many more suffer” (al Attar, 2021, 148). While international law is transactional, it is also existential; it ultimately shapes how we see ourselves and how we see others.

The rhetoric around the ongoing genocide in Gaza is charged because sovereignty, as emotional as it is, is existential. Rhetorical sovereignty determines which lives are not only sovereign, but also defensible and grievable (Butler, 2004). It humanizes and dehumanizes. It is emotional, political, personal, and existential. If sovereignty is anything, it is emotional and rhetorical first—weaponized accordingly—and everything else second.

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## Simulacra of Sovereignty and Statehood: The Biopolitics of Deferral, Simulation and Subalternity

*Andrea Teti*

### The Implications of the Performativity of Orthodox Paradigms

Reflections on categories such as the ‘state’ and ‘sovereignty’ must be conducted on at least two inextricably intertwined levels: the articulation of concepts and taxonomies on the one hand, and their role in actually-existing politics on the other. Unfortunately, the epistemic framework within which orthodox liberal Political Science operates favours Weberian (1919) approaches which conceive of formal institutions within a broader series of ontologically fixed and ‘independent’ domains: sovereignty, the political sphere, the social sphere, the economy. While Skocpol and others refine this framework rendering more complex, and thus more realistic, such refinements do not ultimately transcend the logic underlying these concepts and the broader taxonomical framework they are formulated within.<sup>7</sup> This limitation comes back to haunt orthodox approaches in ways that undermine them.

As Foucault (2008) noted, this taxonomical system emerges concurrently with a particular set of transformations in the forms and techniques of politics – the ‘*Birth of Biopolitics*’ – which among other things are predicated upon the taxonomical, epistemological and ontological distinctions between a series of domains – state/sovereignty, politics, society, economy – presenting themselves as objective. Upon those cornerstones, claims are built about ‘natural’ forms of everything from individuality to ‘proper’ social order, including claims in a positivist vein to the possibility of discovering the ‘laws’ governing social reality as much as those governing the physical realm.

One of the radical difficulties with this approach – which is still hegemonic in Political Science – is that these categories are not merely *descriptive* of political reality but are also *constitutive* of that reality. Indeed, *as categories* they are inextricable from such constitutive political practice, whether through their assertion or contestation, as the extensive literature on the waves of reciprocal contestation of autocratic regimes and progressive civil society actors shows (Abdelrahman 2004; Camau 2002; Carapico 2002). The literature on contestation and state-making also effectively demonstrates as much.

Weberian ideal-types cannot capture this ‘second life’ of concepts and categories, their ‘meta-causality’: those categories are **designed to measure the distance between ideal type and**

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<sup>7</sup> Serious consideration of the less-frequently commented on aspect of Weber’s definition, i.e. the claim over a *legitimate* monopoly of the use of force, give rise to a series of analytical possibilities usually not taken, save by historical sociologists.



# SEPAD

**concrete reality, but precisely for that reason they have no way of accounting either for the *constitutive* effects of the distance they measure (e.g. interpellation, making possible claims to increase/improve surveillance, centralisation, etc.), or for the deployment of those categories in concrete political practices.** As such, both the assumption of the ‘reality’ of these ‘objects’ or their ideal types (Mitchell 1991) and/or the simple *omission* of this dimension in itself has constitutive effects (Teti 2012) that liberal approaches remain necessarily blind to.

Consequently, just as for classical Orientalism, claims explicitly asserting or implicitly assuming orthodox liberal positivist categories – claims to (the ontological distinctiveness of) statehood, sovereignty, etc. – must be understood as not just taxonomical but also *performative* insofar as they elide or marginalise the generative role/function such signs take on. For example, Talal Asad’s observation that the state “independently of the entire population, embodies sovereignty” is an observation applicable to the *claim* to represent, or rather of the Saussurian or Piercean *sign* of representing a population, but a claim that inevitably falls short of reality and insofar as it does so, is performative, is attempting to establish a reality it claims to merely represent. As such, the ontology of liberal concepts and categories is in fact closer to Debordian spectacles or Baudrillardian simulacra than it is to Weberian ideal types.

These performances variously include “the state [as] the embodiment of sovereignty, the vehicle through which power over life emerges,” the state as vehicle of modernity or progress (e.g. during decolonisation and the apogee of Arab Nationalism(s)) or indeed of a return to some Golden Age (e.g. ‘ultraconservative’ Islamists, primordialist nationalists), etc. These *categories/kinds* of performances – and often the specific roles-functions claimed, such as guarantor of justice, law, or order – are not so different between Global North and Global South (the contrary position risks an ultimately Orientalist ‘methodological regionalism’).

For example: if the MENA state is routinely understood as ‘fragile’ or ‘unconsolidated’ and its sovereignty ‘contested’, can the ‘state’ and its ‘sovereignty’ truly be considered complete/established in states otherwise classified as consolidated liberal democracies? This problem is of course not limited to the MENA. Italy and the UK, for example, both score 10/10 on the ‘Polity IV’ scale since the end of WWI. Yet Italy is riven with the interrelation of clientelism, corruption, tax evasion, politics, and organised crime, with a decade of terrorism splitting the country (the 1970s, or *Anni di Piombo*), various attempted coups d’état, not to mention a deeply pervasive cultural and political influence of the Catholic Church undermining secularism. For its part, the UK is the world’s largest centre for money-laundering, which the entire structure of its financial sector (roughly 12% of its GDP) gravitates around, with inevitable consequences for the democratic credentials of its political system. An analogous point can be made about the Netherlands’ fiscal framework which allows it to be turned into a *de facto* tax haven, permitting other companies based in the EU to elude national taxation, undermining states’ ability to undertake redistribution, one of the core functions of a modern state.

Like many European countries, these states also display declining voter turnout, declining trust in ruling class legitimacy, and are increasingly riven with xenophobic politics. Also in both cases most politicians choose to ‘surf’ that xenophobia rather than challenge it, not least



because any serious challenge would require addressing those countries' true structural problems: the rise of precarious/'indecent' labour, tax evasion and elusion increasingly embedding indebtedness and vulnerability to international financial markets and global lenders, reversing cuts to education, to social services, and to health, seriously challenging organised crime, redressing a taxation structure that favours the wealthy while extracting increasingly from impoverished dependent labour, the systematic exploitation of abandoned labour/modern-day slavery by 'illegal' migrants/refugees whose employers are rarely even reprimanded, and so on. Nor are those states and their 'leading' political classes addressing the structural causes that facilitate wealth extraction from the bulk of the population in Global South (e.g. countries of net migration, which is increasingly including some Global Northern states such as Italy or Spain). None of these are issues that politicians or privileged classes in Europe or the Global North are prepared to seriously countenance. Leaderships in the Global South generally fare little better.

It is no coincidence that labour, taxation, corruption, welfare – i.e. social justice – are increasingly similar to the *kinds* of **cleavages** observed in postcolonial contexts / MICs-LMICs / the Global South. Nor does it seem coincidental that parallel to such cleavages are also socio-political **grievances** that are also increasingly similarly handled by local elites through a combination of surveillance, coercive repression and racist propaganda. Indeed, recent developments in Tunisia, the neo-authoritarian Saied regime's turn to xenophobic politics – in this case, anti-Black – mirroring Europe's and the US' own anti-immigrant 'great replacement' narrative, provide a stunningly clear example of this discursive and praxeological convergence. The cleavages and their discursive articulation perhaps do not often align as evidently as in the current Tunisian European case, but this is not necessary for the general point to hold.

From this point of view, it seems more appropriate to think of the evolution of political forms in both the Global South and the Global North as converging around a few characteristics: 1) increasing socio-economic polarization involving the precarization of lower and middle-income classes (with an attendant decline in social mobility); 2) a response to consequent disaffection (declining political legitimacy, participation, etc.) which does not address structural causes of that disaffection, but to various degrees and in various ways deploys discursive and coercive repression (with its attendant 'lawfare') and ideological distraction (blaming 'foreign fingers' and especially immigrants), 3) the consequent increasing precarity and brittleness of 'backsliding' liberal democracies and their ever-more-autocratic counterparts (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2018).

### **Understanding 'identity', 'sects' and 'sectarianism'**

In a postcolonial context such as the MENA/SWANA, 'the state' and/or sovereignty are often defined as 'eroded', 'fragile', 'unconsolidated' or otherwise somehow incomplete, precarious, contested or in any case not 'full'. Representations of non-Western statehood and sovereignty are 'Orientalized' through being defined by *lack* and in contraposition to the supposedly 'consolidated' Western state.



# SEPAD

In most cases, this can come inadvertently through apparently innocent claims by scholars who note that “claims to sovereign power are [instead] found in religion, tribe, ethnicity, economic capacity, authenticity, and other forms of legitimacy” as well as gender, and likewise, conversely, that claims contesting the state are similarly diverse. As a taxonomical exercise in semiotic articulation these observations are not necessarily incorrect. But if these claims about/sources of ‘lack’ are attributed to specific ontologies, epistemologies and causal drives, they miss the broader and more important dynamic: these ‘identities’ and their attendant series of societal divisions and semiotic-material articulations should instead be understood as a series of dimensions or axes not just as forms of *identity* but of what Gramsci called *pregiudizi* (prejudices/pre-judgements). This shift in perspective is crucial because as evident in Gramsci’s analysis of Italy’s ‘Southern Question’, the polarisation of political debate, practices and ‘identities’ is linked to these prejudice axes with the effect of ‘disgregating’ subaltern classes in the Gramscian sense, i.e. producing a constant yet ever-incomplete fragmentation *both between and within subaltern classes*. This constantly fragmenting force provides the base upon which different ruling elites – often metamorphosing from one ideological commitment or identity to another – achieve the effect of (re)producing divisions between and within subaltern/marginalised groups and the resilience of inequalities through *different* means. In short: various incarnations of nationalisms, of articulation of religion and politics (e.g. ‘political Islams’, ‘political Christianities’, etc.) while appearing different, disparate and irreconcilable, actually perform very similar functions in dividing subaltern groups and/or masking the failures of dominant classes (Gervasio and Teti 2023).

By contrast, treating these identities/divisions as ontologically independent is in this sense not merely inaccurate but misses the broader play between these identities/claims and signifier/materiality, and in so doing, facilitates the (re)production of these very disgregative, polarising dynamics, bolstering rather than undermining exploitative effects.

In both senses, then, identities are best viewed not in isolation nor in simple dialogical counterposition. Rather, attention is best focused on the whole field of the distribution of these identities and their interplay, to which it is not at all obvious that state boundaries are relevant *a priori*. This distribution of identities is better understood as part of the ‘field’ of power, the manner in which a particular form of power distributes material and semiotic characteristics in relation to each other – what Foucault called a *dispositif* (Bussolini 2010).

It is therefore misleading at an ontological and especially at an epistemological level to focus on the specificity – and thus ‘distinctiveness’ – of local contexts. Whether through Gramscian or Foucaultian processes, this focus generates a kind of ‘methodological regionalism’ with its attendant Orientalisms – Said himself famously defined Orientalism precisely as a “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (Said 2014, 2).

The reliance on ‘identity’ and an emphasis on ‘sectarianization’ therefore risks being one such avenue to re-Orientalization. Treating these ‘identities’ and their attendant socio-political formations and processes as distinct/distinctive reifies those identities and divisions, and insofar as it does, it can also lead to falling into methodological nationalism and

methodological ‘regionalism’, the *a priori* assumption that phenomena in specific locales are the result of causes and processes only or primarily within that locale.

Identities and their attendant political expressions should instead be understood as *modulations* of/in an established form of power or challenges to it (e.g. resistance in Foucault, revolution/war of position-movement in Gramsci) assessed for their role in reproducing or challenging the established form of power (Marchi 2021).

Such modulations, however, are also not independent across state lines (i.e. crossing the signs of territorial sovereignty) but rather are interconnected whether through similarities or counterpositions. Well-established examples of such entanglements include the similarities between Pan-Arabism and Bismark’s or Mazzini’s nationalism, or between the US ‘Christian Right’ and ‘ultraconservative’ Islamists. Latterly, the case of the xenophobic turn in Tunisian politics provides such a demonstration. The new Tunisian regime’s xenophobic rhetoric parallels its ‘Western’ far-right counterparts’ ‘Great Replacement Theory’, just as its economic strategy and its attendant impasses mirror Europe’s and the West’s own.

## What is to be done?

How then should the state, sovereignty and space – particularly territoriality – be conceived?

1. Sovereignty and the (sovereign) state are to be understood as ambiguous/paradoxical *signifiers* under the rubric of which concrete political practices are undertaken at two levels 1) the exercise of power in its immediate sense as authority, constriction/coercion (Foucault’s *pouissance*) and domination (Gramsci’s *dominazione*), 2) a lynchpin of power in the more general sense (Foucault’s *pouvoir*).
2. The analytical question becomes how to conceive of 1) *sovereignty-as-signifier* and the *state-as-signifier*; 2) the elision between that representation and the (lack of) its ‘reality’ (such as posited in liberal political theory); and 3) the *interplay* between these two.
3. The same goes for each core category of liberal political analysis: the ‘civil sphere’, the ‘economic sphere’/the economy, the ‘political sphere’ (cf. Mitchell 1991).
4. Each of the relations above must be understood as an articulation of a) *discursive-semiotic* practices and b) *material* practices (assuming for ease of exposition the possibility of distinguishing between/decoupling these two dimensions, whereas of course these are inextricable domains).
5. As such, and given the limitations of orthodox liberal positivist approaches, state, sovereignty, and space/territoriality and their intersection / interrelation / articulation are better understood as *effects* – which gain their own independent causal power, but effects nonetheless (Debordian spectacles, or better simulacra in Baudrillard’s sense).

6. The same can be said about how state, sovereignty, and space/territoriality affect lines of inclusion and exclusion such as they are articulated in contemporary contexts (e.g. sect, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, political ideology, etc.).

How can such a perspective be translated into practice? There are of course many possible alternatives, several of which hinted at above. Amongst these are the following key points, from which emerge more general and on more analytically convincing explanations than those offered by conventional approaches currently hegemonic in Political Science:

- retrieving a Gramscian perspective (e.g. more convincing perspective on state civil society-political society relations; Ayubi on regime brittleness, which overcomes the rigid democratization/authoritarian resilience debate (Ayubi 1996); Marchi on the ‘everyday molecularity’ of socio-political transformation (Marchi 2021));
- assessing events and political change on the basis not of their ‘face-value’ identitarian ‘presentation’ (thereby contributing to reifying the same), but of whether they move towards transcendence of material (socio-economic) processes of exploitation of and polarisation between subaltern groups, i.e. the ‘structural’ causes of polarisation;
- keeping in focus the mutually constitutive relation between claims to knowledge and forms of power (Foucault’s power/knowledge, i.e. the fact that forms of power today entail ‘regimes of truth’).

These standpoints/starting points help bring into focus not only specific dimensions of inclusion and exclusion – gender, ethnicity, class, religion, ideology, etc. – but also their possible channels and effects such as state institutions, elections, informal activism, social movements, violent and non-violent contestation, as well as whether these ultimately challenge or reinforce the state/status quo (Challand 2014; Schwedler 2012; Serres and Thomas 2019).

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## The State and Exception: The Case of Turkey

*Gönenç Uysal*

There is a burgeoning academic interest in the notion of exception to discuss the state and its sovereignty in today's world order. Such interest is no surprise for ones who have witnessed exceptional measures the advanced capitalist states and states in the Global South have resorted to. Some scholars date back the exceptional forms and practices to the COVID-19 pandemic when the states “adopt[ed] repressive measures for purposes unrelated to the pandemic” (Guterres 2020). Some scholars date the rise of exception to much earlier, such as in the case of the repressive measures adopted by the United States in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (Ralph 2013), arguably turning the exception into the norm. In the case of peripheries of world capitalism, particularly in the Middle East, the state of exception rather functions as a “new paradigm of government” (see Mabon 2022). In this regard, the prolonged period of state of emergency and the ruling of the country by decrees (in the force of law) since 2016 has been considered as the continuous state of exception in Turkey (Choukroune 2020). This paper aims to critically and coherently discuss the rise of state exception in Turkey in order to contribute to the literature on the exception and the state.

### Debating exception

In the liberal understanding of the state and law, the state of exception includes “any type of severe economic or political disturbance that requires the application of extraordinary measures”, particularly “the temporary, partial or total suspension of ordinary and constitutional laws” (Schwab 1989: 7). Carl Schmitt, most significantly, rejects this idea since the jurisprudence only deals with the normal order and any extreme case is already a “disturbance”. In extreme or emergency cases, law “recedes” whereas the state “remains” to restore and maintain order in the juristic sense “even if it is not of the ordinary kind” (Schmitt 2005: 12). In this regard, Schmitt (2005: 5) identifies the internal relationship between exception and sovereignty as well as the political nature of exception by stating that “[s]overeign is he who decides on the exception”. Giorgio Agamben (2005: 2) draws upon Schmitt to explore how “a permanent state of emergency” can be created and the state of exception can become “the dominant paradigm of government”. For Agamben (2005: 2–3), the state of exception is “the state of war” and “a legal civil war” where the abolition of the distinction among legislative, executive, and judicial powers becomes the permanent practice of the sovereign.

Both in Schmitt's and Agamben's works, the state as the sovereign is rather understood as a political entity that exists external to society and above class-interests. Therefore, the state is understood to aspire after certain interests and goals on its own merits. This ideational conception of the state is criticised by Mark Neocleous who offers a – dialectical – materialist understanding of the state. Neocleous identifies the notion of exception as an inherent and internal feature of the capitalist state. The state of exception is the function of the state that enables “the fabrication of order” (Neocleous 2008: 53). The state of exception is particularly instrumental and necessary to discipline social and political opposition, particularly labour movements and radical political movements. In this sense, Neocleous (2008: 42–59) dates the state of exception back to the seventeenth century, linking the consolidation, crisis, and restoration of the sovereignty of capitalist states in past and present forms.

Even though his critique is important to understand the political nature of exception in relation to material and antagonistic class interests, Neocleous seems to converge with Schmitt and Agamben regarding his emphasis on the state of emergency and martial law. This limits a comprehensive conception of the state of exception as a totality that involves practices and process before and after the state of emergency (Oğuz 2023: 108). In this sense, Neocleous's emphasis on the continuity and arguably permanency of the state of exception complicates the historicising of exception in relation particular configurations of social forces that brings about the political crisis and the crisis of the state.

## **Poulantzas, the state, and exception**

Nicos Poulantzas (1978, 1979, 2008)'s discussion on exception as a form of the state that emerges at particular conjunctures of the political crises and crises of the state and configurations class forces is important for two reasons. Firstly, the state of exception has an inherent political nature that can only be understood in the nexus of material and antagonistic class relations. Secondly, the state of exception cannot be limited to certain legal or legislative practices, but it indicates a fundamental transformation of state apparatuses, such as the judiciary and the police. When the exceptional state is conceptualised as a particular form of state, how the exception becomes the rule is understood in relation to the exceptional transformation of the state and its repressive and ideological apparatuses as well as the reconfiguration of relations among these state apparatuses.

For Poulantzas (2000: 129), the capitalist state is a “specific material condensation of a relationship of forces among classes and class fractions”. The form of state is important to understand the relationships among different configurations of class relations and the transformation of the state apparatus. The forms of capitalist state can be categorised as the normal form of state and the exceptional form of state. In the normal form of state, the bourgeois hegemony remains relatively stable. The exceptional form of state emerges as a response to resolve the political crisis and the crisis of the state through the institutionalisation of exceptional means. The political crisis and the crisis of the state demonstrates the paralysis of the state, demonstrating the political struggles of classes and class fractions with the state

apparatus. The exceptional form of the state manifests the transformation and adaptation of the state to “the new realities of class conflict” (Poulantzas 2008: 297).

### **Turkey, crisis, and exception**

Poulantzas’ conception of the exceptional state can be applied to the case of Turkey, which has staged a prolonged political crisis and the crisis of the state since the mid-2010s. The mid-2010s staged the rise of signals of an economic crisis, which finally broke out in the form of currency and debt crisis in 2018 (Orhangazi and Yeldan 2021). The mid-2010s further staged the rise of working classes and various social forces opposing the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party), such as the Gezi Park protests (Uysal 2013a, 2013b), and the deepening political crisis and the crisis of the state. Most significantly, a power struggle broke out between the AKP and its de facto coalition partner, the Gülen congregation – a branch of Nurcu congregation – by the mid-2010s (Uysal 2019).

The exceptional state is characterised by the restructuring of the state apparatus and hierarchies among the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary as well as the suspension of the electoral principle – but not plebiscites/referenda – and the plural party system (Jessop 2008: 129–130). In June 2015, the AKP in effect suspended the functioning of the Parliament and hence the legislative power owing to its majority following the general election. In the election of June 2015, the AKP lost its parliamentary majority. However, the AKP evaded the public calls for negotiations for a coalition government and stayed in power. The AKP won a majority in the snap election in November 2015, which it forced in the first place.

The exceptional state is further characterised by the restructuring of the state apparatus and hierarchies among the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary as well as the interruption of the rule of law to amend the Constitution and administration (Jessop 2008: 129–130). Prior to the election of June 2015, the AKP government had already assumed the legislative function and overruled the Assembly owing to its majority. Following the abortive coup of July 2016, the AKP declared state of emergency and began to rule the country by decrees. Following the transition to presidentialism in April 2017, the President began to rule the country by presidential decrees.

The exceptional state is also characterised by the extension of its relative autonomy *vis-à-vis* the dominant classes. In August 2016, the AKP established the Wealth Fund (*Varlık Fonu*), which created a discretionary fund for the use of executive power and hence enhanced the relative economic autonomy of executive power *vis-à-vis* the capitalist classes. In this way, the AKP used the Fund as a trump card to promote certain fractions of capitalists and obtain their support.

The exceptional state is further characterised by transformation of the hierarchies among, and fundamental functions of, the ideological and repressive state apparatuses as well as the subordination of the ideological state apparatuses to the repressive state apparatuses and



dominant classes (Jessop 2008: 129–130). In this regard, the exceptional state advances repression and coercion of the subordinate classes. Police and intelligence emerged as the most important repressive state apparatuses. In 2015, the police and the intelligence began to replace the judiciary and undertake extraordinary competences, such as pressuring public prosecutors regarding counter-terrorism cases – for the police – and gathering information about any public or private institution without a judicial decision – for the intelligence.

## Conclusion

The AKP has often explicitly stated that it was “their aim to turn the crisis into an opportunity” (BBC Türkçe 2018). The AKP has managed to turn the currency and debt crisis erupted in 2018 into a shock in relations of distribution by loading the economic burden on the shoulders of working classes (Boratav 2023). The AKP has also managed to evade the destructive political impact of two major earthquakes in February 2023 by gaining the majority in the election in May 2023. However, the crises are also opportunities for social and political opposition to equip with radical discourses and mobilise working classes to challenge the restoration of exception and seek for alternatives that brought about the exceptional state in the first place. For this reason, the understanding of the state of exception in relation to class relations and the nature of the capitalist state remains significant to identify the true character of exception and develop an agenda seeking for alternatives.

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