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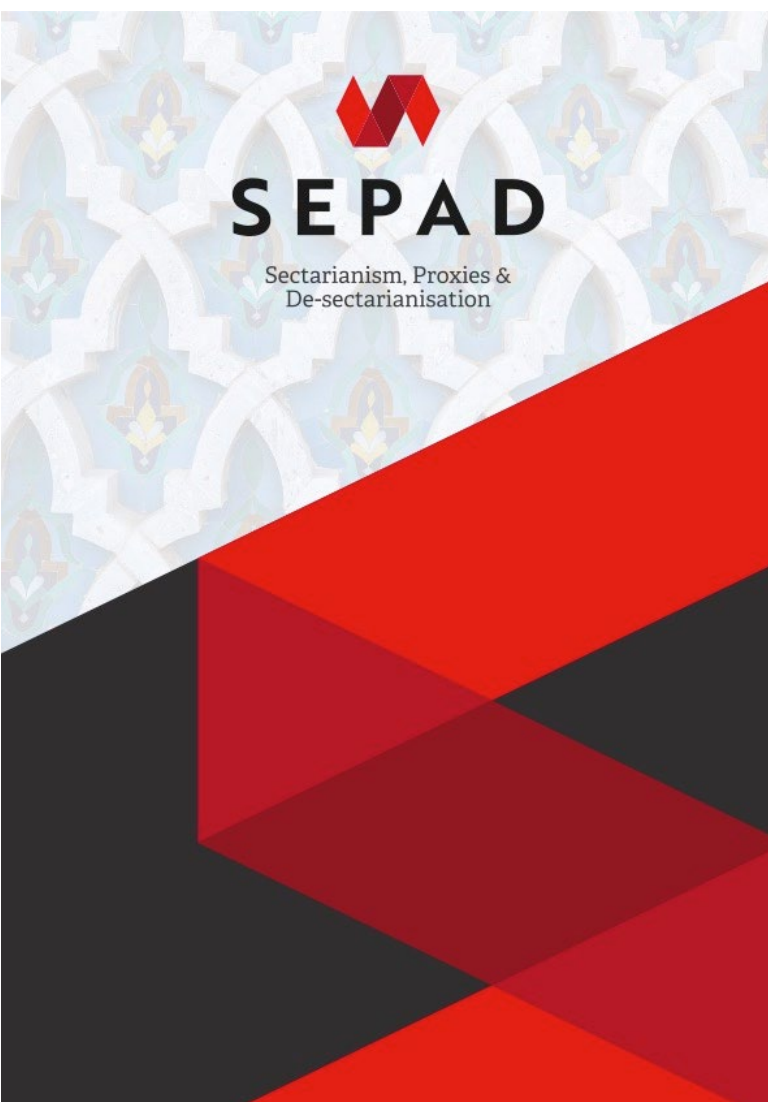
Sovereignty and its Discontents

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Sectarianism, Proxies & De-sectarianisation

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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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Sovereignty and the State

Simon Mabon

> *"We are at war with one another; a battlefront runs through the whole of society, continuously and permanently, and it is this battlefront 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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