

The Islamic State and the International Politics of Statehood in the Middle East

Written by Glen Rangwala

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GLEN RANGWALA, JUL 26 2014

In June 2014, central and northern areas of Iraq came under the control of a loose alliance of insurgent groups, spearheaded by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Over the next month, this group marginalised many of its former allies, established some institutions of governance and coercion in the areas under its control, and, renaming itself as the Islamic State, proclaimed its rule over a swathe of territory that stretches from the city of Aleppo in northern Syria to the Diyala governorate in eastern Iraq.

The Islamic State is a military and political actor that defies easy categorisation. Unlike the many insurgent groups that have come to prominence in Iraq since 2003 and Syria since 2011, it is explicitly and openly transnational. It invites – indeed, it purports to oblige – participation from Muslims across the world in its initiatives (Islamic State 2014a: 5). Territorially, its arena of military action spans an existing international border between Syria and Iraq, and lays claim to transcend others, with Lebanon and Jordan also referenced as future locations for concerted military action (Islamic State 2014b).

Moreover, it is not a group that seeks to capture the power of one or more existing state apparatuses, as other insurgent groups have done. Instead, it sets itself up as *constituting* a new state. It is not, by its own definition, an Islamic political party or Islamic militia; it is, as inscribed in its name, an Islamic State. Although its use of the term *dawla* in its name retains a richly multifaceted meaning, taking in change, dynasty, and empire, its primary meaning in modern political discourse is that of the state (Ayalon 1987: 81-96), and this is how it translates its own name within its non-Arabic language declarations. This claim to statehood poses two sorts of conceptually and theoretically loaded questions for the practice of international politics.

The Questions Posed by the Islamic State – (i) Borders

The first question concerns the resilience of international borders in the face of political change. In the Middle East, the only significant lasting border changes since 1939 have been through the establishment of Israel and its contested frontiers, and through the mergers that led to the creation of Yemen and the United Arab Emirates. The existing boundaries, often derided as the arbitrary creations of European powers, have otherwise withstood 75 years of turbulent history.

The Islamic State, as an explicit attempt to establish centralised political rule over those parts of multi-sectarian and multi-religious countries inhabited by Sunni Muslims, is a direct challenge to these borders. It does so by merging the language of religious authenticity with a discourse of anti-colonialism: its promotional video, released on 29 June and set to a background of religious anthems, is entitled 'The End of Sykes-Picot' (Islamic State 2014b), referencing the Franco-British agreement of 1916 that has rather loosely been the target of blame of Arab and Islamist unificationists for creating modern state borders. Ironically, the boundary shown in the video, whose posts had been destroyed by the Islamic State, was actually created in the nineteenth-century Ottoman division of the *sanjak* of Zor, later incorporated into the *vilayet* of Aleppo, from the *vilayet* of Mosul. [1] This border was ignored in the Sykes-Picot agreement, which considered both to be within the French area of control.

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Notwithstanding the historical accuracy of the Islamic State's assumptions, its assertion that the present-day borders of the Middle East need to be reconfigured is one that has echoes in much recent European and American commentary about the reasons for protracted conflict in the region. As the US-led occupation of Iraq turned into a multi-way conflict within which religious differences became accentuated and the language of sectarianism became pronounced, many analysts looked to the formation of the modern Iraqi state in an effort to uncover the 'roots' of the violence. It became commonplace for commentators and politicians outside Iraq to describe it as an 'artificial' state, created by British colonial machinations, incorporating different ethno-religious groups – Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shi'a Arabs – without consideration for their compatibility (for example, see Anderson and Stansfield 2004: 155, 186, 198). A similar and derivative explanation has since been adopted for explaining the Syrian conflict, this time with French imperial policy in the firing line for the mix of Alawis, Druze, and Sunni Muslims that make up the state's demographic composition (see Fildis 2012).

The legacies of the mandate era in the Middle East are complex, and it would be more accurate to understand the international borders as deriving from a mix of Ottoman administrative policy, dynastic power structures, local expectations, and colonial self-interest, with the significance of each of these factors varying by boundary. Nevertheless, there have been widespread calls, especially with the escalating war in Syria, for a remodelling of the borders to fit present political realities. For example, in early 2014, former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer (2014) wrote that 'the Sykes-Picot structure [was] untenable', former Israeli ambassador to the US Itamar Rabinovich (2014) headlined his article 'The End of Sykes-Picot?', and former UN Under Secretary General Michael Williams (2014) likewise titled his article 'Goodbye to Sykes-Picot?' All, in slightly different ways, proclaimed the end of a specific ordering of territories that has hitherto remained intact since the French authorities detached the Hatay province from Syria and handed it to Turkey in 1939.

The Islamic State addresses the same theme and echoes the language, often precisely, of such commentary. Its particular attention in its political statements, though, is on how these territorial borders have detached political rule from religious authority: they have prevented the emergence of a united (Sunni) Muslim community to which all believers can give their allegiance. It is this argument that runs through the proclamation issued by the Islamic State at the end of June that purports to establish a caliphate (Islamic State 2014a), and the speech given by its leader Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri ('Caliph Ibrahim', aka Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) in Mosul's Grand Mosque on July 5 (Islamic State 2014c). More generally, even for those who consider the Islamic State's reasoning specious, its mindset fanatical and its methods abhorrent, the rearticulation of Middle Eastern political communities along lines of religious denomination and ethnicity, with borders and international legitimacy to correspond, holds appeal for some as the best way to avoid continued large-scale conflict. The apparent military success of the Islamic State poses the question of the desirability of such a form of rearticulation most insistently.

The Questions Posed by the Islamic State – (ii) Statehood

The legitimacy of the present international borders is openly questioned by the Islamic State. There is, though, a second-level challenge that remains pressing for analysts of the Middle East, and of global politics more generally, which the Islamic State brings out. This is the question of the unit of analysis within International Relations, or the character of statehood in the region within Middle Eastern Studies. It is almost impossible to imagine the circumstances under which the Islamic State would receive any form of international recognition, even if it persists for an extended period of time. And yet its self-definition is that of a state, and increasingly its mode of action within the territories under its control resembles those characteristics attributed to statehood.

One possibility is to think of the Islamic State as a 'de facto state' or 'unrecognised state', with all the attributes of internal sovereignty, but without acceptance into the formal structures of the international arena (Pegg 1998; Caspersen 2012). This, however, would not provide any insight into the nature of an international political structure within which state-like bodies without international recognition have come to prominence over recent years. There are many other examples of regions that have come to operate as unrecognised or partially recognised autonomous political entities; these include Hizbullah in large parts of Lebanon, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula in southern Yemen, the Gaza Strip under Hamas's rule and the West Bank under Fatah's rule, the Kurdish-run areas of Iraq and Syria, and the areas of Syria under the control of anti-regime militias.

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Some of these aspire to independent statehood, or to form parts of a future state; others are products of specific political and military movements that seek a protective enclave either for themselves or for an affiliated population that is perceived as vulnerable. Rather than consider them unrecognised states, another option that is potentially more useful would be to consider them as intermediary bodies, state-like in some respects, but not in others. The Islamic State is exemplary in this regard. In other words, the case of the Islamic State at first glance invites the analyst to appreciate the blurred distinction between the state and the non-actor in international politics – that the state as a concept should be relativised, and its position seen in terms of a series of interlocking and potentially conflicting spheres of non-absolute authority.

Within contemporary Middle Eastern studies, in which the category of the state has remained a point of departure (Ayubi 1995), the Islamic State challenges a key motif of recent literature. State-formation and state-building have been conceived in terms of the interaction of the international system with the strategies of narrowly-based political regimes: what regimes lack in terms of domestic constituencies they make up for through rent-seeking within a facilitative international context (see Gongora 1997, Schwarz 2008, Saouli 2012). The Islamic State, however, insofar as it is a product of a transnational network of recruitment and financing, demonstrates the extent to which the international system can turn hostile to the process of state-building. At first glance, again, the concept of state-building loses its distinctiveness as the authority of the state as a singular actor is dethroned.

The Answer Provided by the Islamic State

I have set out how the claims made by the Islamic State challenge the structure of regional borders and ideas of statehood, and will now show how the practices of the Islamic State in fact undermine these challenges.

Although the Islamic State's capture of Mosul and Tikrit in Iraq in June brought it heightened attention, it is worth appreciating its mode of operation over preceding years, through its numerous incarnations. Its nucleus was known as al-Qa'ida in Mesopotamia from 2004; incorporating smaller groups, it became the Islamic State of Iraq from 2006, primarily operating in Iraq's eastern governorates of al-Anbar, Ninewa, and Salah al-Din; and from 2013, through participation in the war in Syria, it became the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Through each of its incarnations, it has been highly mobile, seeking safe zones in which to establish a base.

From mid-2011, it found the ideal base in cross-border sanctuaries – and this is a prime explanation for its later military successes. It was from the Iraqi city of Fallujah that it was able, then unchallenged, to organise the capture of areas of eastern Syria, including the provincial capital of al-Raqqqa in March 2013. Al-Raqqqa then became its de facto capital, particularly after the Iraqi government launched an assault on Fallujah in early 2014; it was able to move its fighters and weapons across the border in to Syria, and from there it was able to move back into northern Iraq later that year. It defied the injunction that seems to have been issued by al-Qa'ida global leadership that it should remain within Iraq, and it did so purposefully. By expeditiously moving across borders, it has been able to mobilise its personnel and facilities to circumvent the action of their opponents which have been reluctant to operate across borders. [2] Although both the Syrian and Iraqi government have launched a small number of aerial attacks on the Islamic State within each other's territory, borders have acted as a significant constraint upon state action.

The presence of cross-border sanctuaries have been a significant factor in explaining the persistence of many rebel movements in modern international affairs (Salehyan 2007). Insofar as they have been relevant to the development of the Islamic State, they demonstrate the importance of borders to the conflict, not as the movement itself would affirm their marginality. In particular, the search by transnational paramilitary actors for sanctuaries can be expected to persist wherever the borders are drawn. This point therefore problematises the view that the longevity and intensity of regional conflicts can be diminished by redrawing borders to fit specific constellations of religious and ethnic identification. These forms of identification have been highly fluid in Iraq's modern history, with various subnational and transnational identities competing with sect as a basis for allegiance, enhanced by the population's mobility, particularly with intense urbanisation since the 1950s (Davis 2005, Zubaida 2002, Haddad 2011). In a political arena as disorderly as that of Iraq since 2003, boundaries translate into opportunities for insurgent movements to proliferate and develop, rather than acting as a means of constraining them.

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The political context within which conflict has developed in both Syria and Iraq, and in which the Islamic State has come to act, is one in which the struggle for control over the state has been predominant. For Iraq, this stemmed from different responses to the US-led invasion, with a set of parallel insurgencies emerging to unseat what rebels considered to be an illegitimate ruling structure, and a rival set of counter-insurgency movements rising to challenge them. In Syria, the central basis of the conflict has stemmed from the Assad government's repression of dissent, the attempt to replace it with a different ruling structure, and the attempt to quell that attempt. For both state and rebel actors, personnel, weapons, and funds have been drawn into the conflicts principally because they were concerned with the future control of the state.

The Islamic State is perhaps best understood as an opportunistic actor within this context, one that is dominated by the contest over the state. It has drawn heavily upon weapons, resources, and personnel that were originally destined for state actors or those who sought to replace them, appropriating and refashioning them for a different purpose. In this way, the trajectory and significance of the Islamic State reaffirms rather detracts from the significance of the state in the Middle East: it demonstrates the distinctiveness of the state as a site of struggle, even if some of that struggle is subsequently diverted. Furthermore, it impels powerful actors to reinforce state authority and recognise the specific nature of statehood. One of these actors is the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, to which we will now turn.

The Answer Provided by the Kurds

The Islamic State's expansion of its area of control in Iraq prompted two significant distinct moves on the part of the Kurdish regional authority, the federal unit in northern Iraq. First, its forces, the *peshmerga*, moved to take full control over security in the multi-ethnic city of Kirkuk, the status of which was left undetermined by the Iraqi constitution. This was done with the approval of the local council and Najmiddin Karim, the governor of the wider Kirkuk governorate, who until 2009 was a US-based leading pro-Kurdish activist. Second, the President of Kurdistan, Mas'ud Barzani, announced a referendum on full independence, asserting that Iraq had already become partitioned, and maintaining, therefore, that the federal structure served no useful purpose for Kurdistan (Kurdistan Region Presidency 2014, al-Jazeera News 2014).

The relevant calculation is that the incentives for Kurdish politics to remain within Iraq have fallen away. The referendum on the status of Kirkuk, seen as the historic Kurdish capital, was intended by Article 140 of the Constitution to have been conducted by December 2007, but was repeatedly postponed. As it is now fully under Kurdish political and military control for the first time since the 1920s, the need for the KRG to remain engaged with Baghdad has diminished: its status has been resolved through possession rather than negotiation. Perhaps just as importantly, major actors in the region – particularly Turkey and the US – see Kurdistan's stability as both important for geostrategic, economic, and security reasons, and under threat from the Islamic State. They are therefore as likely to be sympathetic as they will ever be to a unilateral declaration of independence.

In the context of the Islamic State's heightened visibility, the renewed claim to Kurdish independence demonstrates the significance of statehood in the Middle East. Barzani's attempt to move away from the constitutional federal structure, defined on paper but murky in practice, indicates the unsatisfactory nature of the intermediary stage between sovereignty and sub-state autonomy in a highly contested political climate. The Islamic State has shown through their acts, and in contrast to their words, the significance of the modern borders and statehood in the Middle East. The legacy left by the Islamic State may indeed be the creation of a new state in the region – but it is more likely to be a Kurdish one than one of their own.

Notes

[1] It should be noted though that the exact location of the border was not defined by the Ottomans, and was only set in 1919: see Tauber (1991: 365-66).

[2] Perhaps the most useful English-language resource in tracking the activities of the Islamic State has been the Institute for the Study of War's Syria Updates and Iraq Updates.

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