

# The Governance of Savagery: International Society, Sovereignty and the Islamic State

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## The Governance of Savagery: International Society, Sovereignty and the Islamic State

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JONATHAN BURDEN, DEC 8 2018

### Introduction

At the first Friday prayer service of Ramadan in June 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made his first public appearance as 'Caliph Ibrahim' at the Grand Mosque in Mosul. This marked the public declaration of the 'Islamic State', after the radical Sunni terrorist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) had captured large areas of territory across Iraq and Syria and had begun implementing the group's vision of a restored 'caliphate'; a divinely inspired state for all Muslims based on the example of the Prophet Muhammed and the 7<sup>th</sup> century 'Rightly Guarded Caliphs'.

International Relations (IR) is an academic field constructed around the supremacy of the sovereign, nation-state. Consequently, a non-state actor was not thought capable of forming any governing institutions across a territorial entity roughly the size of Great Britain and containing over 12 million people. Observers had dismissed the relevance of ISIS's grandfather organisation al-Qaeda to IR, by (correctly) arguing that it was not a threat to U.S. hegemony (Drezner 2005). There is however, more to IR than American-centric accounts of world order, security or counter-terrorism. Kenneth Pollack claims that treating ISIS as a terrorist group misses its threat as a proto-state with a significant conventional military threat (2016: 15). As Burak Kadercan has contended, ISIS poses an unprecedented challenge to students of IR, that requires that the complex regional nature of ISIS's challenge is considered (2018: 5). To contextualise and understand this regional crisis that, I adopt the conceptual lens of the English School (ES) of IR for this article which is principally concerned with 'international societies' (Buzan 2004: 12-17; see also Linklater and Suganami 2006).[1]

International societies are collections of states whose interaction is structured by a framework of 'institutions' which are a set of intersubjectively understood shared norms, practices, identity and interests. These institutions include often include sovereignty, non-intervention, diplomacy, the conscious maintenance of the balance of powers, the regular operations of international law and the functional international institutions established to regulate international law. Hedley Bull, perhaps the most influential 'original' scholar of the ES, claims that 'the element of society has always been present and remains present' (Bull 1995: 39) although the 'cohesiveness' of international society is subject to change. Accordingly, Martin Wight suggests that a level of *cultural* cohesion within an international society is needed for these institutions to function (1966). The historical (Bull) and sociological (Wight) aspects of international society will be central in interpreting ISIS's challenge to Middle Eastern international society.

The focus of this article is on the notion of sovereignty: the significance of the institution of sovereignty to international society to understanding the contemporary Middle East, the importance of ISIS's perception of *and* challenge to sovereignty in the Middle East and, taken together, the implications for order between states and non-state groups in the Middle East. The conclusion I draw from an investigation of these factors above is that the Islamic State is an opportunistic, yet viable alternative response to the historical absence of legitimate government in both Iraq and Syria.

To tease out this conclusion, the article is structured in the following way. Section one discusses the most salient

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features of ES theory required for this analysis. Section two discusses the institution of sovereignty as it relates to both the ES and the contemporary Middle East. Section 3 traces ISIS's history to contextualise the group's attitude and aims in relation to sovereignty. Section 4 assesses ISIS as a governing force and points to some evidence that the structural conditions that enabled its rise remain salient. Finally, section 5 serves as a conclusion that ties the discussion together.

## Section 1 – The Conceptual Framework

### 1.1 Value of English School Theory

What then does the lens of international society, from an ES perspective, have to offer in terms of understanding ISIS? Firstly, the ES has been characterized by methodological pluralism, often incorporating insights from political philosophy, history, law, economics and security, thus moving past the methodological parochialism of neorealism and neoliberalism (Hamid 2016).

Secondly, it is argued that the ES is the 'best known sociological perspective' within the field of IR (Krasner 1999: 46). The emphasis on the sociological dimension of international politics within the ES is central to understanding ISIS's vision of a radically different social and political order in the context of a Middle Eastern international society (see section three).

Thirdly, the ES places a strong emphasis on the role of long-term historical processes. Accordingly, a seminal text in the ES is an edited volume by Bull and Adam Watson entitled *The Expansion of International Society* which traces the spread of international society from its developed European core across the globe via colonization (1984). Much of the discussion in this article is underpinned by both the material and intellectual legacy of colonialism and the subsequent formation of the modern state in the Middle East. Additionally, it is argued that the ES can offer more insights than other theoretical positions within IR given its ability to integrate multiple moralities and ideologies into political frameworks (Fox and Sandal 2013: 123).

Fourthly, although international society accepts the state as the primary actor in world politics, ES theory can be read as being sensitive to the role of non-state actors. Bull considered 'private international violence' as possessing the potential to transform international society, citing the activities of Palestinian terrorist groups in the 1970s (Bull 1995: 258-60). Buzan contends that 'violence-wielding nonstate actors such as al-Qaeda threaten the institutions of sovereignty/non-intervention and territoriality, threatening the legitimacy not just of states but also of international society' (Buzan 2015: 135; Mendelsohn 2012). Several edited works have appeared in the past decade that have taken account of the rising significance of armed, non-state actors in world politics in terms of challenging the state, and this article thus feeds into this literature (Mulaj 2010; Aydinli 2016; Yesiltas and Kardas 2017).

### 1.2 Institutions

As I have alluded to, the concept of 'institutions' is central to the ES's understanding of international society. Institutions are generally thought of as some (unspecified) mixture of 'norms', 'rules', 'values' or 'principles' that both construct the 'rules of the game' (the institutional structure of the international system) and define how states 'move' within this framework (Buzan 2004: 161). Sovereignty as an institution thus both defines the powers and boundaries of a state, and structures the actions it can take with respect to other states and its own people.

As Nicholas Rennger convincingly argues, the ES 'is insistent that the notion of society in world politics is intimately connected with ideas of order in world politics' (Rengger 2000: 8) which Bull defined as 'a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of state, or international society' (1995: 8). This leads us on to the 'pluralist-solidarist' debate within the ES, which is related to the degree to which norms, rules and institutions are shared amongst the states in an international society (Buzan 2004: 139-60). Pluralistic international societies are mechanisms for managing conflict and coexistence between states, whilst solidarist societies introduce cooperation over issues of trade or realization of shared values. International societies are thought to exist somewhere on a

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spectrum between the two, subject to the degree to which norms, rules and institutions are routinely reproduced and strengthened. The implication for this article is that when institutions are challenged, modified, or weakened the 'solidarity' of international society is altered. This makes sense if ISIS's challenge to Iraqi and Syrian sovereignty is thought to have undermined the extent to which the Middle East can reasonably be thought a well-ordered society, in the solidarist sense. As I dedicate the next section to discussing the issues surrounding the institution of sovereignty, I shall leave the discussion here.

## 1.3 Concepts to Domains

In perhaps his most significant contribution to the development of English School theory, Buzan translates the three key concepts of ES theory into three 'domains'. Domain analysis breaks international society into interstate society, transnational society and interhuman society, which draw upon, but are sharper analytical tools than IR's three 'traditions' of Hobbesianism, Grotianism and Kantianism. Starting from the premise that this triad has 'served reasonably well for conducting normative and political theory analyses [... but are] almost useless for guiding empirical applications' (Buzan 2009: 25-6), these 'domains' allow legitimate qualitative research to be undertaken within the ES tradition. These domains are:

1. Interstate society – broadly this refers to the conventional use of international society but is solely restricted to what happens between states. In the context of the proposed investigation, this mostly refers to the actions of and relationship between authoritarian-style governments that characterise patterns of governance within the Middle East.
2. Transnational society – this refers to social structures composed of civil or non-civil, non-state actors. Buzan offers Amnesty International and al Qaeda, although with little or no elaboration, as examples of civil and non-civil cases respectively (2004: 26).
3. Interhuman society – this refers to social structures based on interaction between individuals. In the Middle East, this domain is most relevant when religious and sectarian identities are discussed as sources of conflict with inter-state society.

The three domains taken collectively are referred to as international society, whilst transnational society and interhuman society are said to comprise world society (Buzan 2004: 90-138). The three domains are not mutually exclusive but contain institutions, actors, norms, identities and principles that cut across all three. Critically, intersubjective understanding of institutions will differ between domains. Challenges to the institutions of international society can thus be clearly located through this framework. Buzan argues that 'state and non-state [actors] represent distinct social domains that are simultaneously mutually supporting and in tension with each other' (2004: 90-1).

Building on this claim Raymond Hinnebusch sees a major source of instability in the Middle East as originating in the state formation process which cut across pre-existing sub and supra-state identities, which belong in the domain of interhuman society (Hinnebusch 2009: 208-9). Inter-state society is accordingly caught between the need to construct its own identity, without erasing its own legitimacy. This case demonstrates where Middle Eastern international society exhibits less cohesion than in more integrated regions such as Europe, where political contestation takes place within a rarely challenged consensus of diplomacy, international law, democracy, human rights and the market (Ayoob 1999). In the case of ISIS, a non-civil, transnational group has sought to challenge interstate society based upon the grounds which the latter claims political authority. The analytical structure and content of this challenge is explored below (in the form of a 'competing vision of international society') and in section three.

## 1.4 Competing Visions of International Society

Interestingly, the idea of a 'competing vision' can be traced to Bull, who was concerned that global international society, whilst clearly founded on Western values such as sovereignty, economic development, national self-determination and secularism, was also founded *for* the West. Consequently, Bull predicted a 'revolt against the West' which would seek to reject the cultural domination of the Western core in favour of 'traditional' cultural forms (Bull 1984).

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However, Bull's concern was not shared by what might be called the 'second generation' of the English school, under the influence of 'modernisation' theorists. Consequently, focus which shifted towards seemingly more universal concerns, with key works considering themes such as nationalism and human rights (respectively see Mayall 1990 and Vincent 1986). In 1998, Andrew Hurrell wrote that 'we can point to the remarkably broad assertion and acceptance of human rights and democracy, liberal economics, and widely accepted ideas of sustainable development' as evidence of 'a unifying culture of modernization [...] the previous deep fissures within the human rights regime between North and South and between East and West have been eased' (1998: 29-30).

Up to 9/11, the literature at the intersection of Islamism and international organisation was broadly in agreement with Hurrell's conclusion that. Whilst they noted that various strands of radical Islamism were critical of the prevailing norms of the international system, they argued that they did not seek to wholeheartedly reject it. These 'Islamic malcontents' wrote Sohail H. Hashmi, 'do not in general advocate a fundamental assault upon the international system as a whole, or upon its values [...] despite their belief that it serves primarily Western interests' (1996; see also Tibi 1998: 144-6).

The paradigmatic shifting events of 9/11 seem to have altered the conclusions of scholars researching radical Islamists through the prism of IR. Barak Mendelsohn describes al Qaeda and the non-violent Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir as 'couriers of systemic change'; actors who seek to challenge the Westphalian system as an organizing principle for world politics (Mendelsohn 2012). Specifically, Mendelsohn identifies the concept of sovereignty, which decentralises authority and 'constitutes actors in the system by dividing the world into independent [national] entities without overlapping authorities' (2012: 594), as the antithesis of al Qaeda and Hizb ut-Tahrir's vision of a restored 'caliphate', which is incompatible with the status-quo (Philpott 2002).

To the extent these scholars have identified an interesting theoretical alternative to the Westphalian principle of sovereignty, they do not appear to view its challenge as particularly significant for world politics in a material sense. Tibi concludes that, whilst these Islamic fundamentalists ideologically reject the nation-state it is 'difficult to imagine the diverse and rivalrous Islamic fundamentalist movements coming together long enough to create a new order' (1998: 3). The evidence of small scale 'emirs' and the rise of the Islamic State suggests that these claims deserve some reexamination (Lia 2015). Building on Schmucl Eisenstadt's 'multiple modernities' perspective Jonathan Fox and Nukhet Sandal argue that 'one may even argue that there are multiple sets of norms and visions of "international society" that pose a challenge to the existing western-centric system' (Fox and Sandal 2013: 123).

The arguments considered so far fit into the constructivist model of international politics proposed by Fiona Adamson which embeds political entrepreneurs within a 'global structure of political opportunities', where 'broader sets of global ideological structures' shape the 'normative toolbox' available to political entrepreneurs and actors (Adamson 2005). These ideological structures can be read as a 'competing vision of international society' in the language of the ES, which can be drawn upon to reject the primary institutions of international society.

## *1.5 Conclusion*

The significance of institutions to the ES is well understood within the literature, as is a regional perspective (Karmazin 2015). Demarcating international society into three interacting 'domains' in contrast, is a less well-established approach to international society. However, this method will yield some clear and useful insights into the place that ISIS occupies in Middle Eastern international society, especially when combined with the idea of institutions being contested via a post-colonial inspired notion of a 'competing vision of international society'. The following section discusses the primary institution of 'sovereignty' in detail.

## **Section 2 – Sovereignty**

### *2.1 Background*

Building on the recognition that the institution of sovereignty is of paramount importance in interpreting ISIS's place in international society, this section discusses the institution of sovereignty in greater depth (generally and specifically in

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the Middle East). The central argument I wish to advance in this section is that the provision of legitimate (in the interpretive sense) governance should be understood as a feature of sovereignty in Middle Eastern international society.

## *2.1 Sovereignty in the English School*

Barry Buzan's review of the English school's treatment of primary institutions reveals that the emphasis has been on differentiating 'master' or 'foundational' from 'derivative' institutions, and then listing the institutions which are considered most important (2004: 161-204). However, as discussed in section one, sovereignty is pervasive throughout the English school literature whether explicitly listed, as in James Mayall (2000) or Christian Reus-Smit (1997), or implicitly as an embedded assumption of the modern state which is taken to be the basic constitutive unit of international society vis-à-vis Hedley Bull.

Ironically, the designation of sovereignty as a 'master' foundation seems to have precipitated its exclusion from direct discussion within the ES. Since, 'the independent state has everywhere become the standard form of territorial political organisation and all conflicting standards have been discredited' (Jackson and James 1993: 4), sovereignty has a high degree of legitimacy within international politics and is correspondingly unproblematised, in very much the same way that neorealist theory spends little time problematising the state. Instead, institutions at the 'fringe' – those which are most contested or developing – form the focus of attention, for example: nationalism, human rights, humanitarian intervention, the spread of the market system and environmental stewardship.

However, within these discussions, sovereignty is treated as something of an opponent of these 'developing' institutions. For example, related to humanitarian intervention and human rights, sovereignty (and its derivative, non-intervention) appears as a source of tension and incompatibility (Bull 1979; Mayall 2000; Jackson 2000). The closest we find to a critical discussion of sovereignty is in reflections on the legacy of colonialism, which is argued to create unequal patterns of sovereignty, across various Westphalian and imperial forms (Keene 2002). In the following section, I attempt to elucidate a more nuanced understanding of sovereignty as an institution that is also concerned with providing legitimate governance.

## *2.2 Towards an understanding of sovereignty*

In contrast to the assumptions of the mainstream ES, Alan James argues that the 'concept of sovereignty is not an absolute. Rather, it is relative in nature. It is like a bundle of separable rights' (1999: 458). Following James, Stephen Krasner breaks this 'bundle' into three distinct types. These are: international legal sovereignty (mutual recognition of territorial entities), Westphalian sovereignty (exclusion of external actors from a territory) and domestic sovereignty (Krasner 2004; see also 1999; 3-4).

Domestic sovereignty is closely related to the Weberian conception of the state and refers to the ability to exercise authority within a polity. As Fred Halliday has pointed out, IR theorists (of the liberal and realist kind) tend to ignore this form of sovereignty and instead adopt a holistic view of the state which equates the state with the country and fails to distinguish between state and society (1987: 217). Consequently, sovereignty is unproblematised and treated as an ontological given, rather than as an intersubjectively understood, historically contingent method of organising modern international politics.[2]

The (mistaken) embedded assumption in the 'ontological' view of the modern state is that the ability to project sovereignty outwards implies that the state can do the same internally. As a corrective, Robert Jackson divides sovereignty into negative (international legal/Westphalian) and positive components, which is closely related to Krasner's domestic sovereignty, and refers to the ability of governments to provide political goods for the people within its area of jurisdiction. Jackson's argument is made in the context of ex-colonial states in which he argues that they possess negative sovereignty, by virtue of having clearly defined boundaries and UN acceptance, but lack positive sovereignty due to the absence of legitimate governance. Jackson's argument has the advantage of differentiating the state from society, as it recognises that non-state organisations compete with the state to provide

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legitimate governance (Jackson 1990; for a similar argument see Thompson 1995).

This differentiation bears some strong resemblances to Buzan's demarcation of inter-state society on the one hand, and transnational and interhuman society on the other. Where positive sovereignty is strongly asserted, the transnational and interhuman dimension has less direct influence on governance and is thus closely related to how strong, or orderly, an international society is. This point is significant in the context of the contemporary Middle East where states, nationalist and sectarian militia groups (whether Kurdish, Shia or Sunni), Islamist insurgencies and tribal structures compete with the state for governance (Yesiltas and Kardas 2018). As Fawaz Gerges argues, 'the spectacular rise of ISIS, and other armed Islamist nonstate actors in general, is linked to the organic crisis of the Arab state, a crisis of failed political and economic governance decades in the making' (2014: 223).

## 2.3 Perception of Sovereignty

In his study of sovereignty, Daniel Philpott emphasises the extent to which ideas are essential in driving changes in institutions, arguing that 'revolutions in sovereignty result from prior revolutions about justice and political authority' (2000: 4). Whilst I am not making the claim that ISIS is a vanguard movement in a broader general revolution against the Westphalian state, sections three and four demonstrates that ISIS's actions and effects are very much influenced by its ideologues' views on authority, the state and legitimacy. Philpott's conception of change in sovereignty neatly fits into the framework of a 'competing vision of international society' introduced in the previous section, which argues that in non-Western settings Western driven modernity has inspired an ideological backlash against the normative procedures of a global international society.

K.J. Holsti, in agreement with Philpott, wants to emphasise the role of ideas in determining the status of an institution, rather than viewing them as by-products of macro-technological or economic changes, neither of which is sufficient to account for the rise of ISIS (Holsti 2002). Janice Thompson's view of (positive) sovereignty has a similarly constructivist feel to it, where sovereignty is defined in terms 'not of state control, but of state authority [...] which imparts to the state what I call meta-political authority' (Thompson 1995: 214). This is taken to mean that a state has legitimacy over the people or territory over which it claims sovereignty. Legitimacy necessarily has a normative content to it, thus reaffirming Philpott's claim that ideas and beliefs regarding sovereignty matter. Relevant to this discussion 'to whom legitimacy is given, is the crux of the debate between those who advocate the international system characterized by nation-states and those who adhere to Islamic concepts of political organization' (Turner 2014: 46).

Positive sovereignty in the Middle East is thus tightly bound up with the idea of effective *and* legitimate governance. One interpretation of the instability that has characterised the region since the Arab Spring began in 2011 is the failure of inter-state society to establish long-term legitimacy in the eyes of inter-human society. The specific character of sovereignty in the Middle East, since the Arab Spring, is discussed below.

## 2.4 Sovereignty in the Middle East

As noted, ES theory has generally been a state-centric explanation of world politics, whose most fundamental analytical unit has been the Westphalian state, embodied by norms of sovereignty and territoriality. Historically orientated ES explanations have correspondingly been concerned with how the non-European world came to resemble the European state model (Bull and Watson 1984).

However, limiting the analytical framework to the interstate domain, what could be interpreted as the neorealist approach to IR, treats states as monolithic black-boxes, which is unhelpful for understanding the role that armed non-state actors play in international society broadly, and ISIS specifically, within Middle Eastern international society. Accordingly, I introduce positive sovereignty as being a constitutive factor of Middle Eastern international society, necessitated by the move to a non-Western regional perspective where positive sovereignty is not a 'given', but is claimed and contested by various state, quasi-state and non-state actors.

In tracing the source of the tension between inter-state and inter-human society, Raymond Hinnebusch argues that

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the formation of the state system, which was largely imposed by the victorious Allies after the First World War, cut across existing sub- and supra-state identities, causing a situation where there is a lack of congruence between the state and the nation. The result is that states have experienced a legitimacy deficit which has manifested in tension between the inter-state domain and the transnational and inter-human domains (Hinnebusch 2009). Arguing that tensions between state and society have rapidly increased since the Arab Spring, Bülent Aras and Richard Falk contend that the Arab Spring has ended the historical state-society disassociation from regime transformation to civil war (2015: 323).

Reviewing the literature that has considered sovereignty in the Middle East since the Arab Spring, scholars have broadly taken the (implicit) view that negative and positive sovereignty need to be differentiated for an accurate picture of the region to be revealed. In the case of negative sovereignty, Louise Fawcett argues that the long-term robustness of modern state borders in the Middle East is the strongest indicator that recent developments in the region will not cause the collapse of the existing state system (2017; see also Zartman 2017). Leïla Vignal points to the success of the Syrian state military in suppressing both secular and Islamist armed groups that sought to overthrow the government of Bashar al Assad as evidence that the rise of ISIS, in the wake of the Arab Spring, prematurely signals the 'end of Sykes-Picot' and a reconfiguration of borders in the Middle East (2017). Significantly, however, these recent discussions take a fairly 'blunt' realist approach that is noticeably blind to the motivations driving groups such as ISIS to contest sovereignty in the first place. Instead, sovereignty is seen as a negative sum game where the absence of state-centric, positive sovereignty precipitates the rise of non-state actors.

Taking more of an 'inside' view, Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş point towards the changing nature of state sovereignty, claiming that the emergence of ISIS 'helped to transform a homogeneous and absolute understanding of sovereignty into multiple sovereignties' (2018: 152). Appropriating Bull's 'revolt against the West' thesis, Yeşiltaş and Kardaş (in line with Philpott's argument in section one) see ISIS's main objection to contemporary international society as originating in their rejection of the secular state. This perspective considers ISIS as part of transnational society, that draws upon the cleavage between inter-state society and inter-human society which is predicated on the suppression of the latter by the former. I consider this point in more detail in section five.

## Section 3 – The Ideological and Material Development of ISIS

### 3.1 Qutb's Competing Vision of International Society

As I have contended, ISIS's challenge to international society is embodied in its commitment to a competing vision of international society, which rejects the status quo system of states in the Middle East and demands the resurrection of the caliphate, as the only Islamically legitimate mode of governance. Most scholars of the global jihadi movement view the Pakistani Iman Mawlana Mawdudi and, more directly, the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb as its intellectual forefathers (Mandaville 2014; Kepel 2006: 23-30).

Fearing that the Arab nationalist programme initiated by President Gamal Abdel Nasser, after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1952, was a threat to the centrality of Islam in Egyptian society, Qutb's most influential works *Milestones* and *In the Shadow of the Qur'an* can be interpreted as a political critique of post-colonial development, rather than a pure exercise in Islamic theology (Mandaville 2009; Khatab 2010). Qutb's thought thus quintessentially fits into the category of a 'competing vision of international society'.

The central aspect of Qutb's theory of the state is found in the sharply polarising terms sovereignty (*hakimiyyah*) and adoration (*ouboudiyya*), terms which were an invention of Mawdudi (Kepel 2006: 26). According to Qutb, in a legitimate Islamic state 'sovereignty' is solely invested in Allah who is the supreme legislator and source of all political authority. Whilst human beings are required to enact God's will, they themselves are not to be the source of authority or legitimacy, nor are they to be venerated. On the other hand, nationalism with its celebration of the national spirit, people, territory, army, flag and other symbols, alongside the investment of sovereignty in the secular state, was deemed 'adoration' which was made akin to the worship of false idols in the canon of Islam. Qutb's conception of sovereignty thus utterly rejects the Westphalian conception of the nation-state, which had come to dominate the

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Middle East after de-colonization, due to the location of political and legislative authority in a secular state.

Having set out the case that the modern nation-state is founded on the principle of 'adoration', Qutb made innovative use of the term *jahiliyya* (ignorance), which is traditionally used to refer to pre-Islamic Arabia. The claim was that Egypt in Qutb's time exhibited a similar absence of Islam as a guiding principle in society. This reinterpretation of *jahiliyya* inferred a reworking of the traditional division between the dar al-Islam (the abode of Islam), and dar al-harb (the abode of war), territory which falls outside the traditional boundaries of Islamic jurisdiction and which could be legitimately ignored by Muslim rulers. By forcefully stating that the dar al-Islam was in a perpetual state of *jahiliyya*, Qutb turned the concept of *jihad* on its head, making the overthrow of the prevailing political order a necessary duty for all Muslims (McGregor 2006).

Although traditionally, *jihad* referred to a personal, or defensive, struggle, S.M.A Sayeed states that 'Qutb took *jihad* into the widest possible connotation as the sole instrument to combat *jahiliyya*' (1995: 151-2). Having deemed any political order not based on Qur'anic ideals as antithetical to Islam, Qutb equated any individual supporting the nation-state as un-Islamic, thus placing the highly controversial practice of *takfir* (excommunication) at the centre of his political theory. Crucially, *takfirism* is argued to be the 'watershed between moderate and radical Islamism. If *takfir* is religiously lawful, then violence and revolution are religious duties' (Roy 1995: 37). Clearly influenced by Qutb, ISIS's systematic use of *takfir* has been argued to be the group's most significant distinguishing feature from the wider *jihadist* movement (Baczko et al 2018: 200-1).

### 3.2 From Qutb to Zawahiri

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan created the conditions for Qutb's brand of Salafi-Jihadist thought to move from a fringe political phenomenon to a fully-fledged transnational movement. Most relevantly for the evolution of the global Jihadi movement, the major figure of the war was Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian cleric who was instrumental in reconstructing Qutb's thought on *jihad* into more of a strict obligation on all believers (Mandaville 2014: 340). Accordingly, Azzam's major contribution was to broaden the appeal of international *jihad* whilst also reintroducing the concept of the 'caliphate' into the discourse of radical Islamists – whereas Qutb had been primarily concerned with the development of the Egyptian people, despite his anti-nationalist views (McGregor 2006).

Azzam's other main contribution to global jihadism was through his partnership with Osama bin Laden, who quickly established himself as a leading *jihadi* owing to his logistical skills, coupled with his vast family wealth. Azzam and bin Laden created the Mukhtab al-Khidmat (Services Centre) in 1984, the forerunner to al Qaeda (AQ). After the Soviet withdrawal, most of the 'Afghan Arabs' returned to their home states, where they became prominent members of Islamist resistance groups in countries such as Algeria, Jordan and Pakistan (Mandaville 2014: 335). Many, however, remained with bin Laden, who replaced Azzam (after his assassination in 1989) as the leader and major figurehead of AQ. It is from this point that Salafi-Jihadism truly went 'transnational' with AQ promoting itself as capable of establishing a global caliphate to cater for all Muslims (Rajan 2015: 44).

There is thus a clear tension between the inter-state domain in the Middle East, which had a record of oppressing Islamist political groups (for example, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s and in Tunisia in the 1990s) and a narrow but important stratum of transnational society, represented by AQ and its affiliates. In line with Bull's assertion that the primary goal of states in international society is to ensure their own survival, authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have successfully resisted political Islam's goal of overriding the imposed post-colonial state system.[3] However this failure does not imply failure on the part of Islamist politics as Islamic principles are 'very much alive in the transnational and interhuman domains where they create a problem for state elites caught between dependence on the West and legitimacy with the people' (Buzan and Gonzalez-Palaez 2009: 246).

### 3.3 Zarqawi and the origins of ISIS

The exact relationship between AQ and other radical, Salafi-Jihadist movements is often ambiguous with different groups entering uneasy strategic alliances or splitting due to minor doctrinal differences. ISIS has a particularly tense history with AQ. Founded in 1999 by a veteran of the Afghan War, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, and originally called



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Jama'at al Tawhid wal Jihad (Organisation for Monotheism and Jihad), the group moved between Afghanistan, Iran and Jordan before correctly predicting the US-led coalition invasion and moving to Iraq.

In 2003, Zarqawi was asked by bin Laden's chief military officer Muhammad Ibrahim Makawi to coordinate the entry of AQ fighters into Iraq through Syria. With the backing of central AQ, Zarqawi was quickly able to establish himself as the most effective Islamist insurgent in Iraq. However, despite being nominally allied to AQ, Zarqawi was operationally more in line with the Qutbian ideal of overthrowing the 'near enemy', those Arab governments deemed to have abandoned *hakimiyyah* in favour of *ouboudiyya*. In September 2003 he called for attacks against Iraqi Shia militias, despite their active opposition to the collectively despised US coalition (Gerges 2014: 71). and designated the Shias the group's main enemy in an internal policy memo. In contrast, bin Laden wished to avoid creating a sectarian war between the minority Sunnis and majority Shias for primarily strategic, but also theological reasons. AQ has a complicated relationship with revolutionary Shia-Iran, that often manifests as a pragmatic alliance against their mutual, American, enemy.

Despite these doctrinal differences, Zarqawi's Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad changed its name to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004 and Zarqawi swore a *baya't* (oath of allegiance) to bin Laden. This uneasy, primarily strategic, association did little to solve the strategic or ideological differences between the two as Zarqawi increased the use of suicide bombers against Shia targets, further entrenching the developing sectarian divide that was also being perpetuated by the new Shia dominated Iraqi government headed by Nouri al Maliki, who was elected in December 2005.[4] The aim of the systematic use of *takfir* against the Shias should not be interpreted as a purely xenophobic form of identity politics against Shia Muslims (although by all accounts Zarqawi did exhibit a psychopathic hatred of all Shia Muslims), but as a way of resisting a perceived 'Iranian-American alliance [that] was purposefully keeping [Sunni Iraqis] from their rightful place as the true masters and custodians of Baghdad' (Weiss and Hassan 2015: 48). Terrified by the prospect of a Shia led government equating Sunni Iraqis with Saddam's Ba'athist regime and exacting revenge, Sunni tribal leaders increasingly aligned themselves with Zarqawi's militia. This development was followed by an 'Iraqization' of his franchise, the creation of the 'Mujahidin Advisory Council of Iraq' and a rapid increase in the territory to which the group was able to lay claim to. However, Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. airstrike in 2006.

In some ways this represents the high point of the first iteration of ISIS and is argued to mark the end of substantial ideological development. Gerges stresses that there is no substantial difference between ISIS's current leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, and Zarqawi, stating that Baghdadi's perception of the Shias is 'an extension of al Tawhid wal Jihad's or AQI's worldview. Both belong to the generation of jihadists who consider the Shias not only heretics but also a "dagger" in the heart of the Islamic world' (Gerges 2014: 83).

Following Zarqawi's death, the Mujahidin Council changed its name to Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) and established a full governing cabinet. This moment is of huge significance. It indicated the group's intent not simply to harm the 'near enemy' but to actively overthrow it. Perhaps for the first time there existed an organization with the capability *and* motivation to overthrow the *jahiliyya* nation-state system and replace it with *hakimiyyah*. This promise was, however, fleeting as the group declined in influence throughout 2007-8.

Charles Lister argues that where ISIS 'attempted to govern, communities ended up opposing their presence. Put simply, ISI overestimated its capacity to engender Sunni support and overstretched its forces, leaving them vulnerable' (Lister 2014: 9). The result was that the Sunni tribes in ISI territory set up *Sahwa* (Awakening) Councils with the aim of expelling ISI. Backed by the central government and the American 'surge' of 30,000 troops into Iraq, ISI was reduced to the status of a 'traditional' terrorist group. Between 2009-11, the group would consolidate and rebuild before capitalizing on the dramatic transformative effects of the Arab Spring in 2011-12.

### 3.4 The Intellectual Road to the Islamic State

The influence of major theorists such as Qutb and Azzam is rarely acknowledged by ISIS's central leadership, but the legacy of their thought can be clearly detected. The most directly influential source on ISIS is a widely circulated document known as '*The Management of Savagery*', written under the alias Abu Bakr al Najji, although two further

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texts – ‘*Introduction to the Jurisprudence of Jihad*’ by Abu Abdullah al Muhajjer and ‘*The Essentials of Making Ready [for Jihad]*’ authored by an associate of Zawahiri known as Dr Fadl – are highly salient texts for contemporary state-building jihadists. Although there are slight variations across the three ‘manuals’, they all seek to provide justification for the practice of *takfir* and thus are primarily orientated towards fighting the ‘near enemy’.

The three texts collectively detail a path for establishing the caliphate, which focusses on limiting the extent to which the central state can assert positive sovereignty. For example, Najji specifies that crucial economic targets should be the focus of *jihadist* attacks, with the intention of stretching the state’s security forces too thinly to resist sustained attacks, which will lead to the withering of the state’s power. The resulting power vacuum can be filled with committed believers who can begin the task of restoring the caliphate.

## 3.5 Conclusion

Previously, I alluded to the fact that writers in the ES tradition had speculated that radical Islam, embodied by AQ, could challenge the fundamental institutions of international society but had done little to flesh out these statements. This section has tried to show how the evolution of Salafi-Jihadism is tied to interpretations of sovereignty and the decolonization process vis-à-vis the ES’s emphasis on the historical evolution of the state system.

## Section 4 – Rise and Legacy of the Caliphate

### 4.1 Breakdown of the Iraqi state and the Resurgence of ISI

In the wake of the 2003 invasion, the US-led coalition’s policy of ‘De-Ba’athification’, induced the total disbanding of the army and the effective deconstruction of the state as an institution. Intended to empower the individual in Iraq, the result was simply to dissolve authority to the next level down in Iraqi society; a mixture of Kurdish nationalist parties in the North, Iranian backed Shia-Islamist movements in the South and Sunni tribal sheiks in the centre (Wrzesniewski 2014: 93). With the first free election in Iraq’s modern history occurring in 2005, amongst almost total Sunni apathy (2% turnout amongst Sunni voters in the large Anbar province), the Shia politician Nouri al-Maliki became Prime Minister. Re-elected in 2009, the central feature of his government was the continued disenfranchisement and political isolation of Iraq’s Sunni minority (Krieg 2017). Significantly, the Sunni tribesmen and militia of the *Sahwa* council, who had liberated the West of Iraq from ISI, were rarely re-employed by the state. Many were left with no income and this contributed to the perception that the central government in Baghdad was systemically discriminating against Sunni Iraqis.

Although operationally reduced to terrorist activities, and devoid of most of its leadership, ISI was able to make a dramatic comeback between 2011-14. Continued disillusionment with Maliki’s government caused the group’s influence to increase in Sunni-dominated areas (Lister 2014: 10). In 2012, the group launched the ‘Breaking the Walls’ campaign, aimed at releasing ISI fighters from Iraqi prisons. The campaign’s high point occurred in 2013 when the group was able to release 500 fighters from the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, just outside Baghdad. Between 2009 and 2013 ISI killed more than 1,300 Iraqi leaders which undermined Sunni confidence in the government, who in turn stepped up discrimination against Iraqi Sunnis (Byman 2018). Simultaneously, ISI used the instability caused by the escalating civil war in Syria to establish a foothold across the border, under the guise of Jabhat al-Nusra. These factors allowed the group to rebuild.

Discrimination against Sunni Iraqis also caused the number of former Ba’athists amongst ISI’s top leadership to increase, which allowed it to present itself as a quasi-police state. This ‘Ba’athization’ of the organisation is significant, as these experienced recruits provided ‘administrative and logistic blueprints, spy networks, crucial links to the tribal system, command and control mechanisms, and military strategy and tactics, all of which are important inputs in ISIS’s bid to rule the caliphate’ (Coles and Parker 2015). In April 2013, ISI changed its name to ISIS to incorporate Jabhat al-Nusra. However, Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, denied this merger, which led to ISIS revisiting its strategy in Syria. Using mainly defectors from Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS demanded and, in many cases, established total control over parts of society in Syria (Lister 2014: 11-16).

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Simultaneously capturing territory across Iraq and Syria, including the cities of Raqqa, Mosul, Ramadi and Fallujah, this development marked the start of the 'Islamic State'. In June 2014, from the pulpit of the Great Mosque in Mosul, Baghdadi proclaimed the re-establishment of the caliphate and began the project of uprooting the state in favour of the Islamically ordained caliphate.

## 4.2 The Islamic State in Governance – Legislation, Justice and Law and Order in the Islamic State

The Islamic State's use of coercive force and brutality to control territory and populations is well understood (Friis 2015; Ahram 2015; Cetorelli et al 2017). However, this section is concerned with the 'other face' of the Islamic State's rule; what Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan have called the 'steady application of jihadist soft power' (2015: 221). It has been suggested that the group's commitment to effective governance, and not its brutality, has been the most surprising characteristic of the Islamic State (Lia 2015: 36).

Given the emphasis in Salafi-Jihadist thought on the illegitimacy of the secular, sovereign state, the character of legislation and justice in the Islamic State is of paramount importance to the Islamic State's claims to provide a viable form of government. In terms of constructing viable, alternative institutions, the introduction of *shariah* courts across the Islamic state was hugely significant. These courts took a close interest in the problems of the people under their rule. In one case, the group mediated a resolution to a thirty year 'War of the Roses' style conflict between the al-Hassoun and al-Rehabiyeen tribes in the border region of Syria (Weiss and Hassan 2015: 207). Fieldwork in Syria suggests that ISIS were very effective in aligning themselves with tribal interests. For example, one defected ISIS fighter claimed that the Islamic State took an interest in tribal society and social divides created by the civil war which allowed the group to grow on 'the outcasts of the revolution' (Bakczó 2018: 204). In contrast to the central governments in Baghdad and Damascus, ISIS has applied its standards to its own members and consequently 'the Islamic State uses its legal system to build goodwill with communities that are desperate for order and security' (Revkin 2016: 31).

In terms of providing security, ISIS carefully managed the supply of weapons and ammunition available to other militant groups in Syria, allowing them to retain their weapons on condition that they fight exclusively on the frontline. The removal of weapons from the streets eased the concerns of people who have been used to living in fear of petty theft, robberies, assaults, kidnapping and murder; ISIS 'thus caters to popular fears about the absence of law and order by offering itself as the only alternative to societal collapse' (Weiss and Hassan 2015: 231-2). Indeed, it seems that the Islamic State's priority upon entering a new territory was to cut-down on 'ordinary' crime – murder, theft, rape and drug dealing, to build goodwill with the population before the strict introduction of *shariah* rule.

Although assessing the extent to which people under the rule of the Islamic State were genuine supporters of its ideology is extremely difficult (Revkin and Kao 2018), 'even its opponents have acknowledged that the Islamic State's legal system is generally more efficient and effective than the available alternatives' (Revkin 2016: 11). Juxtaposed to the 2012 survey of Iraqis in which only 4.8% of respondents said that they trusted the government 'to a great extent' and 30.2% said that they 'absolutely do not trust it' (Hoffman 2012), the Islamic State was also able to present itself as a viable alternative to decades of corruption and secular authoritarianism.

Providing welfare has been a key operational method for modern insurgencies, as it has been for ISIS (Grynkewich 2006). A detailed RAND report on the macro-economic consequences of the Islamic State's occupation of large parts of Iraq and Syria concluded that 'ISIS faced a clear trade-off between devoting resources to holding a city militarily and devoting resources to [effectively] governing it' (Robinson et al 2017: 182). Given the group's propensity to survive and learn from its mistakes, it is likely that a resurgence of the group would not be conducted in such a high-profile manner, to avoid attracting the level of coordinated conventional attacks by Western powers which have been instrumental in rolling back the Islamic State. Significantly, even as far back as 2006, the group was able to become financially self-sufficient through a combination of extortion, ransoms and oil exportation, generating somewhere between \$70-200 million per year. Crucially, the Islamic State has repeatedly shown itself capable of operating without significant external donors or state backing.

## 4.3 Lessons Learnt? Iraq After the Caliphate

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The collapse of ISIS held territory does not imply that the group has ceased to be a threat in the Middle East. The following section will make two points: one, that the sectarian strife that characterised ISIS's rise is still prevalent, and two, that ISIS remains an active force whose recent activity is grimly reminiscent of its recovery phase between 2011-14. I mainly focus on the legacy of occupation in Iraq, as this is where the group has had the longest association, and the continuing conflict in Syria makes any assessment of ISIS's impact here both premature and significantly more complex.

In Iraq, the main obstacle facing the central government is how to establish their own inclusive, post-Islamic State sense of nationhood. The sectarian divides in Iraq, mutually constituted and compounded by the actions and rhetoric of Sunni Islamists and the Shia-led government in Baghdad, are still highly relevant. A report by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) found that the central government has done little to aid the return of the 2.5 million Sunni Muslims who had been internally displaced by the conflict with the Islamic State. The report suggests that 84% of these people felt some sense of unease about returning home, with the most common reason cited being the fear of 'proliferation of violence and retributive acts perpetrated against returnees for their perceived links with ISIS' by Shia and Kurdish militias (Saieh et al 2018: 15). Anecdotal evidence suggests that Sunni Muslims have been prevented from returning home by Kurdish militias seeking to expand their areas of influence (Hendawi 2017). In Sunni majority Mosul, the plan to remove the federal police and Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias in favour of an army unit led by a popular Sunni tribesman have been stalled.

In terms of justice, the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have seemingly been more concerned with retribution rather than due process. The central government has handed out some 3000 death sentences for suspected members of the Islamic State in the past few years alone. A review of the judicial process has found that these trials rarely last longer than 10-15 minutes and are conducted without forensic evidence and rarely with witnesses; the result is a 98% conviction rate (Hendawi et al 2018). A study by the United Nations University found that the failure to distinguish between different levels of involvement, say between ISIS fighters and those who had served as supporters (cooks, medics, cleaners etc.) or wives of ISIS fighters was 'widely perceived as collective punishment of Sunnis, which appears to be generating new grievances that could fuel the emergence of what many analysts predict will be an "IS 2.0."' (Revkin 2018: 3).

Prior to losing vast areas of the country to ISIS in 2014, the Iraq government's ability to control the country was hampered by the relentless campaign aimed at key military and government officials. Evidence suggests that prior to Islamic State territory being lost to U.S.-backed forces in both Iraq and Syria, the group decentralized, setting up sleep cells in the rural and desert areas, primarily centred around the Syrian-Iraq border to resume this insurgency strategy. Interviews with defectors from the Islamic State suggest that in the event of the loss of territory in Syria and Iraq, ISIS soldiers planned to blend into normal society and mount guerilla style attacks (Speckhard and Yayla 2016). As Hassan Hassan argues, 'ISIS has seemingly undergone an orderly transition from caliphate to insurgency without fracturing' (2018).

In July 2018, tribal leaders in the Iraqi province of Salah al-din reported that Islamic State fighters were responsible for a variety of attacks, including murder, arson and kidnapping, on farmers and rural villages where security forces were unable to react (al-Jibouri 2018). Worryingly, recent intelligence reports from the Pentagon suggest that 'ISIS is probably still more capable than at its peak in 2006-2007' when the group was carrying out up to 1800 attacks per week (Seldin 2018). As ever, ISIS has further benefitted from political and sectarian tensions. The elections in May 2018 were marred by controversy, with wide-spread accusations of electoral violations and, days after a manual recount of many votes was decreed, the largest storage facility of ballot papers burned down. Fueled by disagreements over the Kurdish declaration of independence in December 2017, in a referendum the government in Baghdad considers illegitimate, Kurdish Peshmerga and federal forces have been unable to coordinate security in disputed, ethnically diverse regions such as Kirkuk and Diyala. Consequently, the main road between Baghdad and Kirkuk has regained its 'highway of death' reputation from the 2006-7 period, due to ISIS's ability to carry out ambushes and kidnappings along the route in the absence of coordinated security efforts (Rasool 2018). Furthermore, a speech by Baghdadi, released in August 2018, seemed to indicate that the group's activities would continue to target tribesmen who cooperated with the Iraqi state and U.S. forces. There is thus ample evidence that ISIS remains a potent force within Iraq, and the wider Middle East.

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## Section 5 – ISIS in International Society

### 5.1 Summary:

The stated aim of this article has been to contextualise ISIS's challenge to Middle Eastern international society, through a close reading of sovereignty. At a theoretical level, this has been undertaken by considering how ISIS's 'competing vision of international society', which exists in the transnational and inter-human domains, has challenged and, in some cases replaced, inter-state's form of governance. The empirical evidence presented in sections three and four suggests that ISIS's 'competing vision', at least in the short-term, can be implemented as an alternative form of governance to the status-quo system of nation-states. The task now is to assess what this tells us about international society in the Middle East.

### 5.2 International Society Through Domains

I have argued that one source of instability in the Middle East has been the tension caused by the formation of inter-state society in the Middle East. As noted in section three, 'Islam' has largely been marginalized as a direct influence on inter-state society, although it remains a salient form of identity and source of legitimacy within inter-human and transnational society (Buzan and Gonzalez-Palaez 2009: 246). This has resulted in legitimacy deficits between the state and society (Hinnebusch 2009). Related to this, the formation of the state system created the incentive for state elites to consolidate domestic power and transform the government into authoritarian security states.[5] Thus, the result of these legitimacy deficits is that governance in the Middle East since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been characterized by the 'robustness of authoritarianism', to borrow Eva Bellin's phrase. In these conditions, Salafi-Jihadism has increased in prominence by articulating a worldview that rejects the legitimacy of this status-quo system of states and by attempting to establish alternative forms of governance in terms of crisis for the state.

### 5.3 ISIS: Symptom or Cause?

If my assessment of ISIS's motivation is broadly correct, then there can be no doubt that sovereignty has been contested vis-à-vis the rise of the Islamic State. There are, however, two readings of this challenge that require reconciling. The first sees ISIS as a symptom of a deeper problem resulting from the lack of effective positive sovereignty in the Middle East in the modern era, exacerbated more recently by the failure to construct any robust or legitimate institutions of government in Iraq after 2003, coupled with the related increasing rise in sectarian tensions and the opportunities generated by the Syrian Civil War. The second reading suggests that the global Salafi-Jihadist movement has been a significant causal factor in the failure of sovereignty through its rejection of the secular state in the Middle East, reaching back to its intellectual inception in the 1960s and its material origins in the Arab-Afghan resistance of the 1980s, and accelerating after the invasion of Iraq.

To synthesise these two perspectives, I draw upon Fiona Adamson's argument, cited in section one, which contends that political entrepreneurs (in this case Islamist groups) utilize the 'normative toolbox' of a society, which is taken to be a set of commonly understood values, norms, rules, cultural references and traditions. Although one must be careful not to reduce Middle Eastern cultural and value systems to a monolithic understanding of 'Islam' (Zubaida 2011), the rhetoric and selective interpretations of the Qur'an to form an alternative view of the state clearly does have some resonance within Sunni, inter-human society in the Middle East (Hashmi 2009). In line with Bassam Tibi, I take the position that the challenge of fundamentalist Salafi-Jihadism is political rather than cultural, stemming from 'the crisis of legitimacy that derives from the failure of the nation-state to strike roots in an alien civilization' (Tibi 1998: 8). The insights of section three help to illustrate the exact character of the 'challenge' to international society, especially in relation to the content of the alternative conception of sovereignty established by the Islamic State, but I conclude that the regional wide character of authoritarian-style sovereignty in the inter-state domain is the main cause of this backlash.

This does not imply that cultural or religious principles have no role to play in constructing legitimate governance; in fact, the best way to counter ISIS's twisted theology is to utilize more recognizable and moderate interpretations of

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Islam to highlight the aberrations in ISIS's *takfirism*. For example, emphasizing the identity of the *ummah* (worldwide community of Muslims) would go some way towards reducing the salience of sectarian identities in Iraq. As the Anbar Awakening in 2007 showed, where ISI overstepped in terms of implementing its radical governing agenda, depriving itself of an image of legitimate government, it lost the tacit support required to control territory. It is thus essential that policy-makers continue to pay attention to the internal ideological debates, where possible, within ISIS and the broader Salafi-Jihadist movement to combat attempts by ISIS to re-establish itself territorially.

## 5.4 Limitations

This investigation does, however, have limits. As noted above, the Islamic State has not been the only movement that has attempted to claim sovereignty for itself. For example, it appears that the U.S.-backed, predominantly Kurdish, Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) has managed to negotiate a relative degree of autonomy from Damascus in the North-Eastern regions that it controls. I have not had space to consider the role of other nationalist groups or secular resistance groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) or the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, who have made differing claims on sovereignty and whose place in international society requires contextualizing. However, following the claims of scholars who have attempted to integrate religious groups and concerns into the predominantly secular field of IR, I anticipate no major methodological barriers to carrying out this research.[6]

Secondly, most of my discussion regarding positive sovereignty has been related to Iraq. The geopolitical interplay between the Syrian regime, Iran, the Free Syrian Army, the Kurdish resistance, Turkey, Russia, USA, Israel and China, as well as various Islamist factions including HTS (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) and ISIS, is arguably more significant than intersubjective understandings of sovereignty in the short-term. However, given it is likely that President Assad will stay in power, inter-state society across the Levant and into Iran is predominantly Shia led, the recent history of the Middle East suggests that Sunni minorities may yet be subject to further oppression.

## 5.5 The Future of Middle Eastern International Society

Recall that in section three, it was noted that AQ wished to avoid direct conflict with the Shias in Iraq, partly due to AQ's association with Iran. Simultaneously, ISIS differentiated itself via the systematic use of *takfir* against Shia Muslims. In June 2017, ISIS struck in Iran itself for the first time with a coordinated attack targeting the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian Parliament, killing 17. As Iranian influence increases across the Middle East – officials in Tehran boast of holding four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa – it is perhaps likely that the next step in ISIS's strategy will be to carry its insurgency to these places and attempt to coopt the support of Sunnis there. Whether ISIS restricts its insurgency activities to its spiritual homeland of Iraq and Syria, or looks elsewhere to re-establish its caliphate, the argument presented in this article suggests that whilst, the status quo, authoritarian mode of governance remains dominant across the region, the potential for ISIS to coopt Sunni grievances in support of its long-term goals persists.

## 5.6 The Middle East and English School Theory

At perhaps its most meta-theoretical level, the ES has been concerned with 'progress and its limits' (Linklater and Suganami 2006; Mayall 2000). This has traditionally been concerned with how Hobbesian international societies transformed into Grotian international societies, and eventually into a Kantian universal moral culture. Yet, neither the mechanics of inter-state society, nor the considered features of inter-human society seem to indicate any movement towards this liberally-inspired world society. This suggests that, while the analytical components of ES theory are useful for historical and political analysis, there remains a gap between IR's understanding of international society in the Middle East, and inter-human's society *interpretation* of international society.

In the introduction I made the claim that Western policy-makers and the academic community failed to predict the rise of the Islamic State. Perhaps it is this gap between the analytical tools of IR and the epistemological framework in which IR is conducted in the West that has led to the failure of scholars to predict the major 'upheavals' in the Middle East. This article's main contribution to ES theory is thus the dual demonstration that it is an excellent analytical theory but that it requires serious attention to be paid to non-Western ideals and values, embodied in this

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article by 'competing visions of international society', to produce 'solutions' to the problems it so clearly highlights.

Despite clearly being the product of processes that are traditional concerns to IR, as noted in the introduction, ISIS is a problematic case for IR theory. The discussion presented here is thus intended as a 'first word' in a two-way process where IR theory attempts to account for ISIS, and the emergence of ISIS highlights some weak areas in existing IR theory.

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## **Endnotes**

[1] This approach has some precedence. For example, see Toros and Dionigi, 2017; Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, 2018.

[2] For critiques of the realist and liberal approaches to sovereignty also see Ruggie, 1983 and Ashley 1984.

[3] On Authoritarianism in the Middle East see Bellin, 2004.

[4] For Iran's role in deepening sectarian divides in Iraq see Cohen, 2018. For al-Maliki's role in exacerbating the tensions between Sunnis and Shias see O'Driscoll, 2017.

[5] For an account of this transformation see Filiiu, 2015.

[6] On the secularity of International Relations, see Fox and Sandal, 2013; 1-5. Thomas, 2005; 21-46.

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