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# The New Middle East, ISIL and the 6<sup>th</sup> Revolt Against the West

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**ABSTRACT** *paper aims to provide an analysis of the ‘new’ in ‘the new Middle East.’ We argue that what is ‘new’ is the revolt against the West currently underway in the contemporary Middle East, challenging the dominant values of Western statehood and personhood. The paper identifies the novelty in the politics of radical antagonism, apocalyptic geopolitical imagination, the re-birth of extra-territorial subjectivities and the politics of resistance, which together shatter the existing political logos. Two particular empirical cases animate our discussion; namely the Arab Spring and the ISIL. By providing such groundwork, the paper also hopes to point to new avenues for further research that would go beyond the confines of narrow, ethnocentric accounts of ‘the new the Middle East.’*

## Introduction

It has become commonplace to speak of the map of the Middle East as being re-written, and regional politics undergoing an ongoing radical transformation since the so-called ‘Arab Spring.’ Contemporary geopolitical commentaries often endorse a new language to describe the perplexing state of affairs, tethering it to such concepts as ‘the new Middle East.’ The latter was originally coined by Condoleezza Rice, who, during the latest Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, dismissed the country’s suffering as “the birth pangs of a new Middle East.”<sup>1</sup> Soon afterwards, politicians of various stripes turned it into a slogan; the term also proved appealing to the literati, giving rise to an ever-expanding series of books and articles that have since blossomed in reference to ‘the new Middle East.’

This paper aims to provide an analysis of the ‘new’ in ‘the new Middle East.’ After a brief perusal of the existing explanations, we argue that what is ‘new’ is the revolt against the West currently underway in the contemporary Middle East,

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## U.S. attacks on Iraq, alongside the Arab Uprisings, became the main catalysts for destroying the region's political unity and opening the path to the old sectarian divisions

existing political logos. Two particular empirical cases animate our discussion; namely the Arab Spring and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). A case study on the challenges posed by ISIL seeks to illuminate how the organization constitutes the 'sixth revolt' against the Western state system. By providing such groundwork, the paper also hopes to point to new avenues for further research that would go beyond the confines of narrow, ethnocentric accounts of 'the new the Middle East.'

which is dead earnest about challenging the dominant Western values of statehood and personhood. The paper identifies the novelty in the politics of radical antagonism, apocalyptic geopolitical imagination, the re-birth of extra-territorial subjectivities and the politics of resistance, which together shatter the

### Debating the New in 'the New Middle East'

When the Arab uprisings began to dramatically reshape the political spectrum of the Middle East, the term 'new' gained additional purchase in the form of volumes of new titles, including Fawaz Gerges' *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, Shadi Hamid's *Temptations of Power, Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East*, Marc Lynch's *The Arab Uprisings: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* and Paul Amar and Vijay Prashad's *Dispatches From the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East*. Let no one think that publishers were slow to pick up on that trend.

It therefore comes as no surprise that many scholars are grappling to understand, conceptualize, and theorize the new historical transformation by looking at different domains of Middle East politics. There are many different, conflicting arguments though, concerning the nature of the transformation in the Middle East. Most of these arguments are directed by two models of explanation: spatial and temporal models, respectively, that seek to lay bare the sources of the said transformation in Middle East politics. While the first model directly refers to outside forces or external actors with their putative influence in the region, the second model draws a parallel between the past and the present, or an analogy between history and contemporary Middle East politics.

The first model is best represented by Christopher Hill's, *The End of the Arab State*, which focuses on political transformation –the border changes and ideological divisions– and mainly blaming American interventions in the region. On such bases, Hill claims the dissolution of the Arab nation-state<sup>2</sup> and

accordingly the degeneration of political identity in the Middle East. The resulting vacuum has been predominately filled by sectarian divisions, which have plunged the region into total anarchy. Hill asserts that sectarianism had been present in the region the entire time; however, the rulers, as in the case of Ba'athism in Iraq, had resorted to policies mainly focusing on civic identity so as to bar sectarianism and to preserve Iraq. According to Hill, the U.S. attacks on Iraq, alongside the Arab Uprisings, became the main catalysts for destroying the region's political unity and opening the path to the old sectarian divisions.

Another argument, focusing mainly on the impact of external actors in the region, is the so-called post-Ottoman syndrome. The latter assertion can be found in the book *Shifting Sands: The Unraveling of the Old Order in the Middle East* by Avi Shlaim, who argues that history is going backwards and the roots of the current conflict may be found in the post-1918 peace settlement which was further evoked following the Arab Uprisings.<sup>3</sup> The book shifts the onus mainly onto Britain and France, through the Sykes-Picot agreement, which demolished the old Middle East political order, the consequence of which is the contemporary chaotic state of affairs.

Another contention is articulated by Bobby Salman Sayyid. Analyzing the current order in the Middle East, he asserts that, "Arab Middle East is part of the idea of this geographical construction through which any order expresses itself or tries to express itself [...] What is clear is that the conflict right now is between the post-Western regional order and the status-quo."<sup>4</sup> Sayyid claims that because it is not in the interest of Western states to allow the regional states to be sovereign and independent, they generally do not support governments that enjoy the support of the people. That is, the issue is not really about democracy or its external promotion, but rather about who is going to best serve the interests of Western powers, an agenda which leaves weak states precariously close to collapse. In such an environment it is much easier for actors (such as ISIL) to gain control and become stronger by the day.

Considering the second model, which aims to make sense of the perplexing political context of the Middle East by way of finding historical antecedents, the prominent argument is Hass' *The New Thirty Years' War*. Explicating the Middle East's current political imbroglio, Hass draws a parallel with one of the most devastating periods in Europe's history, namely the Thirty Years War, to contemplate the future of the Westphalian order in the region. From Hans Morgenthau<sup>5</sup> to Friedrich Kratochwil,<sup>6</sup> many scholars have considered the Westphalia treaty as the turning point for modern international politics. While the treaty itself did not herald the end of the conflicts in Europe (taking into consideration the Balkan wars or the World Wars), a significant principle emerged regarding the recognition of the sovereign equality of states. Accord-



Opposition troops affiliated to the Damascus Front attacked the ISIL with heavy weapons in the north of Aleppo on November 04, 2015.

AA PHOTO / HÜSEYİN NASIR

ing to Hass, the ‘representative of the Bohemian Protestants’ in the modern Middle East, Mohamed Bouazizi, triggered a conflict whose end, even after four years now, is highly questionable and vague. ‘The Arab Middle Age’ is considered to be still in its infancy, an era where chaos and unrest prevail, as they did during the pre-Westphalian era in Europe. Whereas the Europe of the 17<sup>th</sup> century gradually evolved into a state system, moving towards a Westphalian inter-state order and society of states firmly interlinked through institutions of diplomacy, international law, alliances and inter-state war, the new Middle East has descended into sectarian civil wars and societal anarchy. The religious-sectarian struggles and wars –be it civil or proxy– are the main elements that reveal such a transformation. Hass claims that, “the region’s trajectory is worrisome: weak states unable to police their territory; the few relatively strong states competing for primacy; militias and terrorist groups gaining greater influence; and the erasure of borders.”<sup>7</sup> The master concept of this perspective is the “Arab Middle Age” and the analogy is to the ‘dark Middle Ages.’

Mohammed Ayoob similarly asserts that the Arab Uprisings incited sectarian clashes in Middle East, as in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia and Egypt. Ayoob too explains the new order in terms of an old experience, namely the ‘cold war,’ now mainly conducted along two axes: Iran-Saudi Arabia and Russia-U.S.<sup>8</sup> The first regional axis –Iran and Saudi Arabia– is mainly based on sectarian, economic and strategic differences in perspective. Thus Iran supports Assad’s regime, Hezbollah, Shia militia groups in Iraq, and

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Houthis in Yemen; while Saudi Arabia, feeling threatened by a strong Iran in the region, supports the opposition forces in Syria, the Sunnis in Iraq and the opposition forces in Yemen. The second axis is perceived mainly at the global level, where America’s support for Saudi Arabia and Israel may be balanced by Russia’s support for Iran and the Assad regime.

While these studies shed light on some of the new dynamics of regional politics, limiting analyses to finding different parallels between the present and the past, or even blaming the past for what the Middle East faces today, is simplistic and scarcely captures the complex nature of the new Middle East. Rather than providing a more comprehensive picture, such analyses tend to generate more questions than answers regarding the process of transformation *per se*. What, then, are the characteristics of the ‘new Middle East’?

### **Understanding the New in ‘the New Middle East’**

Considering the three pillars of the Westphalian international order (sovereignty, territoriality and secularism), it can be said that it is these very foundations of order that seem to have collapsed the ‘new Middle East,’ hence challenging the main contours of modern statehood and regional order. At first sight and from a narrow realist and materialist perspective, the Arab Uprisings have failed to change the overall balance of power in the regional state system. The distribution of power among five regional powers: Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel, remains basically the same. At a closer look, however, many facets and outcomes of the Arab Uprisings become more visible, which should be taken into account for a better grasp of the ‘new Middle East.’ If we are to capture what is at stake in the region, and how regional order is changing as a result, we need to broaden and deepen our understanding regarding the complex nature of the transformation of the Middle East.

The initial, complex nature of the region began to manifest itself after the 9/11 attacks. The emergence of the Pentagon’s “New Map” made a clear division between the Core and the Gap, and defined the latter as an inevitable threat, helping to legitimize the Iraqi War in 2003.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. intervention in Iraq contaminated what the Sunni leaders of Ba’athism had tried to hide be-

## The decline of state sovereignty is not limited to the emergence of ISIL however; many sub-state military organizations had already challenged it, making the region's state structures more complex and hybrid to begin with

hind the curtain of civic identity. As the façade was exposed, sectarianism became unavoidable, not only within Iraq but also in neighboring countries. Through a domino effect, stability was jeopardized in other states as well, such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. It is within this milieu that one of the striking features of the ongoing transformation in the Middle East becomes apparent: the changing character of state sovereignty.

To capture the dynamics of the latter, it is necessary to problematize the transformation in the whole region in relation to Westphalian subjectivity and its foundations.

The turmoil in the Middle East challenged the Westphalian political order as the states started to dissolve along religious or ethnic lines, to the degree that a 'balkanization of identity' (mostly between Sunni and Shia) occurred. The existing state borders were disputed, mainly as a result of the civil wars, leading to so-called 'failed states.' These events led to a new border politics challenging the existing geopolitical space. On the one hand, a re-bordering process is taking place –as in the Kurdish case– while, on the other hand, a re-territorialization process is concurrently underway –as in the case of ISIL. Further challenging the Westphalian set is the mass migration out of Iraq and Syria towards neighboring and European states, in particular from the conflict areas dominated by ISIL, which in turn is attracting an intriguing reverse migration, the *hijrah* of people flocking to join the so-called Islamic Caliphate in the form of foreign fighters.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Changing Contours of State Sovereignty*

As many pundits have pointed out, the Arab Uprisings have significantly shaped the ongoing transformations in the Middle East. The foremost impact has been on the nature of universal "state sovereignty" that came into existence in the region following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Particularly after the sudden rise of ISIL as a politico-military entity claiming successful control over considerable parts of eastern Syria and western Iraq, the decline of state sovereignty became prominent.<sup>11</sup> The rise of ISIL helped to transform a homogeneous and absolute understanding of sovereignty into multiple sovereignties. The decline of state sovereignty is not limited to the emergence of ISIL however; many sub-state military organizations had already challenged it, making the region's state structures more complex and hybrid to begin with. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Middle Eastern countries took pride in identifying themselves as successful nation-states (Iraq, Egypt, Jordan,

Turkey, etc.) within the framework of territorial integrity and national unity. The expansion of the European state system<sup>12</sup> and the idea of territorial integrity along with it legitimized state control over a specific territory, while nationalism aimed to create a meaningful fusion of the state and society with reference to variants of context-specific nationalist ideologies and ideologues.<sup>13</sup> The state as the main apparatus of the Westphalian political order in the international system was gradually transferred to the Middle Eastern society of states; a society of states based on the principle of territorial and sovereign equality. It was during the 20<sup>th</sup> century that various Middle Eastern states consolidated their power, a power conferred in part through international recognition of their nominal, 'negative sovereignty'.<sup>14</sup> However, the Arab Uprisings dramatically shifted the political imagination, questioning the suitability of the classical idea of Western preference of state-centered order over societal and individual concerns regarding justice<sup>15</sup> in the Middle East.<sup>16</sup>

A corresponding predicament of the contemporary Middle East is hence related to the distinction in the Western political order between 'negative' sovereignty (the right to be free from external interference) and 'positive' sovereignty (the ability to satisfy the basic needs of the population).<sup>17</sup> For example, while in Africa international society is likely to grant negative sovereignty to entities lacking positive sovereignty, in the Middle East the opposite is increasingly the case, particularly with the Syrian Kurds' *Kobane* defense and ISIL's experiment in state-making as two of the pivotal examples.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Radical Antagonism in the Post-Westphalian Regional System***

After the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), the Treaty of Westphalia laid down the foundations of the modern state. Emerging from the centralized hierarchical authorities (i. e. religious rulers), came the Westphalian system, presenting a decentralized horizontal system of rule, where states were accepted as sovereign equals.<sup>19</sup> This sovereign equality however, in itself was twofold: internal and external. Considering the current situation in the Middle East, it can be said that state sovereignty has been challenged both internally and externally. Internally, it is obvious now that the economic, political and security matrix of the region has been suffering from erosion. Externally, tasked with exerting influence in conflict resolution efforts functioning as a constraint on states, regional security organizations (such as the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the GCC and so on) have become ineffective in the face of states that are differentially impacted by conflicts, and hence, support incompatible responses to these conflicts. As a result of regional disorder and fragmentation, regional organizations have become dysfunctional and unable to address regional security challenges in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Iraq, and Gaza. Such conditions are dismantling the mechanisms required for constructing regional order, forcing actors to turn to unilateral preferences or short-term alliances, themselves deepening rather than alleviating the existing predicament.



## The rise of ISIL could be seen as symptom of a transformation in which the emergence of non-state, violent actors reflects the limits of state monopoly over violence, legitimacy and nationalistic claims

and economic structures of the region's sovereign states. As the Arab Uprisings transformed into security crises, particularly after the military coup in Egypt in 2013 and the intensification of the civil war in Syria, non-state armed actors began to directly challenge the Westphalian notion of the state, placing increasing pressure on the regional system with actions that weaken the region's conventional border forms. A dismal consequence of their emergence is that the conflicts and wars that previously were waged between states have now steeped into social fabrics, while modes of conflict over border security have penetrated deeper within borders, stoking new antagonisms. ISIL, as a violent, non-state armed actor, serves as a striking illustration at the center of such repercussions.<sup>20</sup>

ments. It is also obvious that sovereignty in the region is frequently punctured by international military interventions.

One result of the persistent power vacuum in the post-Arab uprising is the phenomenon of the newly emerged, violent, non-state, armed actors that further undermine the institutions, national ideologies,

### The Rise of ISIL as 'the 6<sup>th</sup> Revolt against the West'

The question of what is new in 'the New Middle East' becomes more visible and intriguing when ISIL is taken into consideration. The rise of ISIL could be seen as symptom of a transformation in which the emergence of non-state, violent actors reflects the limits of state monopoly over violence, legitimacy and nationalistic claims.<sup>21</sup> However, in terms of its nominal institutional reformulation of state, ideological re-visioning of international politics, radical geopolitical imagination, and extreme code of conduct *vis-à-vis* the existing regional political order, ISIL is more than a pathological consequence of the new transformations; ISIL is a sociological phenomenon rather than a simple geostrategic novelty.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the establishment of the caliphate is hardly an anachronistic *faux pas*. While the US security bureaucracy and European politicians of various stripes dub ISIL 'barbarian'<sup>23</sup> or 'medieval',<sup>24</sup> some scholars contend that it amounts to a 'revolutionary state'.<sup>25</sup> Although the organization clearly conducts various appalling terrorist acts, it also represents an experiment in state-making in its imposition of bureaucratic and other governmental structures over Iraq and Syria that not only destabilize the nation-state conventions but also deconstruct the territorial architecture of the existing Middle East order.<sup>26</sup>



Located 210 kilometers in the north of Baghdad, the Beyci oil region is controlled by the Iraqi army and the Shi'a militias affiliated with Hashd al-Shabi.

AA PHOTO /  
IDRIS OKUDUCU

We argue that a new revolt against the West is underway in the contemporary Middle East, one that challenges the dominant values of Western statehood and personhood. The term ‘the revolt against the West’ was perceptively coined by Hedley Bull to make sense of the tensions between order and justice in international society, specifically inequality and its social, political, and economic repercussions.<sup>27</sup> Bull developed the theme of ‘the revolt’ initially in reference to the struggles of former colonies against Western dominance in world politics. Its claim to universality notwithstanding, Western international society upholds its hegemonic view of international order and membership criteria for being accepted into the Western society of states.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, the modern society of states has, over time, grown able to make certain forms of state acts either legitimate or illegitimate, as in the case of global disgust with apartheid<sup>29</sup> or of ISIL’s woman and child slavery or publicized beheadings of civilians. While up until the nineteenth century it was impossible for aspiring states to gain acceptance because of their alleged failure to reach a ‘standard of civilization,’<sup>30</sup> the modern Western society of states is awash with its continuing sense of superiority in the parlance of the war on terror, Islamophobia, and the war on extremism, sometimes labelling dissent as ‘barbarism’ on a par with sterile, western secular humanism. It clearly declines to engage ISIL with its ‘international political/diplomatic culture’<sup>31</sup> that would normally value preserving the existing order by including even radically different cultures and ideologies through conventions and institutions of diplomatic engagement.

The ‘revolt against the West’ is a helpful analytical construct to demonstrate how different civilizations joined the international system through the gradu-

al *and* bloody expansion of European principles of international society that forced non-western peoples to abide by European conception of the world order. In search of freedom and dignity, the revolt for equal membership into the international society of states was realized, by some, after a grueling historical struggle by non-western elites to successfully challenge Europe's moral superiority and political prowess.<sup>32</sup> For Bull, this struggle went through five phases: the first was a legal revolt, 'the struggle for equal sovereignty,' mainly undertaken by Japan, Turkey, Egypt and China, which 'retained their formal independence' but also were seen as 'inferior' to the Western states. In the second 'political' revolt against the West, the former colonies not only asked for legal equality, but also freedom from colonial domination. The third was the 'racial' revolt against the West, aiming to abolish both slavery and white supremacy, whereas the fourth, 'economic' revolt was staged against inequality and exploitation by Western-dominated global capitalism. The fifth revolt was 'cultural' in the sense that it opposed Western cultural imperialism and its orientalist contention that other peoples of the world should live in Europe's image and historicity, as exemplified in the universalizing of liberal conceptions of human rights.

It can be argued that while still constituting a 'revolt against the West,' the first four phases made effective use of Western conceptions of freedom, equality and recognition, with some revolting states fully adapting to Western modernity and its patterns of social and political development at the same time, thanks to their westernized 'suppliant' elites. However, Bull sagaciously claims that being 'a revolt against Western values as such,'<sup>33</sup> the fifth, 'cultural' revolt could seed conflict and disharmony of a different sort. For example, al-Qaeda, as a product of the fifth revolt, particularly after the 9/11, London 7/7 and Madrid 11-M attacks, led a global terrorist resistance against what it saw as the Western hegemony and wars in Afghanistan, its unconditional support for Israel, and corrupt pro-Western regimes such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Even though al-Qaeda posed serious threats to the Western state system, lacking a central command and control structure, this revolt has proved evasive. After the fifth revolt, we argue, a new revolt has emerged in the contemporary Middle East, challenging the dominant Western political values. The sixth revolt against the West bears serious ramifications and challenges for the future of international society, as it marks a radically different encounter and poses different tribulations than the previous revolts. ISIL is the embodiment of the sixth revolt and it poses four challenges to international society: First, it upends the 'domestic analogy'<sup>34</sup> that holds in its assertion that international society is not analogous to domestic society. That is, unlike in the modern society of states, where secular institutions have the right to make 'primary rules' (how society should behave) and 'secondary rules' (how primary rules are made and enforced),<sup>35</sup> for ISIL the sources of both type of rules can neither be neither secular institutions nor states, but instead, theology. The adversity and atypical

nature of the sixth revolt is such that while ISIL's theology seeks to create a new regional order in which territorial lines are drawn on the basis of religious identity, its politics seeks and demands recognition as a sovereign state in the international system of states.<sup>36</sup>

Second, because of its counter-revolutionary tendencies, its vision of international relations is outside the institutions and purview of the western society of states. It proposes its own vision of *world society* as opposed to the 'universalist cosmopolitanism' of western *world society* by taking the global population as its target audience with a view to projecting its radical religious identity and model of governance far beyond the confines of the secular society of states.<sup>37</sup> ISIL's vision of Islamic civilization contains a hegemonic conception of international politics in which it believes it occupies the center, with the traditional Islamic view of the world divided between believers and infidels, located in the land of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*)<sup>38</sup> and the land of War (*Dar al-Harb*), respectively.<sup>39</sup> For instance, the west's most prominent institutions, such as non-intervention and secularism, are simply anathema for ISIL. Hence the sixth revolt is unique because it poses atypical challenges to certain prominent institutions of international society, namely diplomacy and war. As for the institution of war-making, the use of force by ISIL does not conform to Clausewitz's famous mantra that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means.'<sup>40</sup> From Charlie Hebdo<sup>41</sup> to various so-called lone-wolf attacks on the symbols of Western states<sup>42</sup> to the Ankara Attack that killed 102,<sup>43</sup> the actions of universal ISIL operatives are 'not followed by diplomatic demands which are usually compromised as part of the usual "give and take" of politics.'<sup>44</sup>

The third aspect of the revolt against the West is ISIL's *apocalyptic geopolitical imagination*. Its declaration of the caliphate in June 2014 challenged the structure and conception of traditional borders among Arab states and triggered a process of re-bordering alongside the religiously meaningful geography of Syria and Iraq, based on the justification and discourse of *end-times*. This is neither secession nor partition,<sup>45</sup> but a process of narrating ISIL's own religio-political caliphate as new form of sovereignty.<sup>46</sup> The process of re-bordering manifests itself in two distinct ways. First, ISIL externally reclaims the status of the territorial caliphate by physically deconstructing the Sykes-Picot order,<sup>47</sup> which defined the terms by which the last caliphate came to an end. Secondly, it internally re-territorializes its political power and status by way of



**By geopolitically coding its significant Other with reference to a normative reconceptualization of good and evil, ISIL manifests itself as the true representative of the "Islamic jihad" and justifies its presence/ fight/violence as political normalcy**

The *Peshmerga* forces in Iraq are on guard against possible attacks from ISIL a thousand kilometer along the border line.

AA PHOTO /  
EMRAH YORULMAZ



generating a new geopolitical space by eliminating the symbols (Sykes-Picot) of the traditional order.

The emergent *apocalyptic geopolitical space* practically requires an antagonistic struggle not only against those who are the ‘enemies of the Caliphate’ but also against any Muslims who present themselves outside the trajectory of *Sunni* Islam. ISIL employs select strategies to legitimate such unwavering discourses of enmity as the true, literal, and inerrant words of Allah, regardless of the changing geopolitical realities facing the regional competitions. This is in part achieved through the use of geography for strategies of radical “Othering” through the language of *hadith*. That is, even though ISIL adopts the language of the “end of time” to advance its cause by narrating itself into a “clash of civilizations”<sup>48</sup> in which the West is reduced to the infidel and permanent enemy, the discourses of “Other” are manifested in many ways.

The geopolitical imagination and meaning-making strategies of ISIL *vis-à-vis* its enemies, revolving around the conceptions of “friends and foes,” and “good and evil” in regional politics, indicate how a non-state military actor’s geopolitical mentality works. In part by geopolitically coding its significant Other with reference to a normative reconceptualization of good and evil, ISIL manifests itself as the true representative of the “Islamic jihad” and justifies its presence/fight/violence as political normalcy, particularly in fighting against other states and non-state military organizations.<sup>49</sup> This process of the rewriting of practical and ideological geopolitical imagination also represents the Caliphate as the political institutionalization of bordering and belonging with

a view to protecting “true Muslims,” both in regional politics and in the cities, where the orders of Caliphate are accepted as supreme rules of Islam. This double meaning-making strategy of dividing state authority and naming places into binary geographies (of good-Muslim and evil-Others) helps to legitimate the process of radical geopolitical reconstructions in world politics.<sup>50</sup> For example, the prophetic representation of the geostrategic competition over certain cities in Syria (as in the case of the religious representations of *Dabiq*) is an example of how spatial constructions are informed by *apocalyptic* geopolitical thinking.<sup>51</sup>

**In terms of the political reformulation of the state, ISIL defends its own territorial understanding and the supreme authority of the *Ummah* in world politics, while rejecting the Western state system as an innovation incompatible with Islamic doctrine**

For ISIL, to make this kind of geopolitical picture intelligible from the perspective of Qur’anic toponyms, the process of naming spaces in religious terminology is vital; in this way, state and regional borders are (re)defined in accordance to traditional Islamic concepts. Inscribing dualistic names into places constitutes a theocratic intervention in that it helps to dismantle existing local identities. The act of naming therefore does not simply sacralize the topography; it also constitutes the very subject who does the naming. This epistemological strategy of textualizing spaces in dualistic Islamic terms in line with prophetic history also helps to justify and shore up the ontological status of ISIL as the only legitimate fighting force against select infidels (*Murtad*).

The fourth challenge of ISIL is that it runs counter to the very idea of international society because it does not rest on the ontology of states; that is, as in the case of the Kantian (revolutionist) tradition, ISIL’s ontology is neither the state nor the individual but an (utopian) idea of the *Ummah*, understood as the unity of Muslim countries,<sup>52</sup> under one single central authority of *Hilafat*. That is, unlike previous revolts, this is not an elite undertaking, a top-down initiative, but one involving a different subjectivity –namely that of the *Ummah* community of believers as a whole, a new multi-national subjectivity of inhabitants. The unifying thread of the latter is religious denomination or a utopia, the ideological force of which can be noted in the case of foreign (fighters) citizens flocking to its ranks from all over the world. By declaring a new ‘state *within* the state,’ with reference to the Islamic concept of sovereignty which is articulated around the idea of the *Ummah*, ISIL considers that there is no division between religion and politics and that the state should be based upon the Qur’an, following the word of Allah in a unified way, as in the first Caliphate (*Hilafat*).<sup>53</sup> According to

the theorizing of the ISIL's state, sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to Allah and Allah alone, while the caliphate, as a worldly institutional reflection of divine sovereignty, is also the representation of Allah as *al-Malik*.<sup>54</sup>

In this theo-political reformulation of state authority, states are hierarchically and unequally ordered in world politics and sovereignty does not belong to a person or a group of people; rather it is redesigned according to a utopian call based on divine rule.<sup>55</sup> By establishing a hierarchically ordered caliphate on religiously defined territorial lines, ISIL completely disregards the territorial integrity and right to sovereignty of surrounding states and nation states as a whole in the region.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, in terms of the political reformulation of the state, ISIL defends its own territorial understanding and the supreme authority of the *Ummah* in world politics, while rejecting the Western state system as an innovation incompatible with Islamic doctrine. The most striking examples of the rejection of the Westphalian political conception of statehood and personhood can be seen in the case of the foreign fighters burning their passports when they first join ISIL in Syria and Iraq.<sup>57</sup>

The symbolic and powerful ritual of passport burning<sup>58</sup> is another testimony to the atypical nature of the sixth revolt, in that it signifies the changing layers of subjectivity away from national identity, seen as a sign of loyalty to a supposedly universal group, and a renunciation of existing identity markers, yet another drawback in the multicultural politics of the European Union. As such, it ignores one of the foundational claims of the international society –namely the society of sovereign equals tied together by the logic of *raison de système*.<sup>59</sup> In short, ISIL challenges almost all of the 'primary institutions' of international society that incorporate the classical 'Westphalian set,' such as sovereignty, territoriality, war, international law and great power management, nationalism and human equality.

### **In Lieu of Conclusion: *The Re-birth of Extra-territorial Subjectivities and the Politics of Resistance***

Within the context described above, ISIL presents a double predicament to world society: while it clearly does not belong to a Westphalian political imagination with its corrosive effect on state sovereignty, it is not a pre-Westphalian, medieval entity either. For it clearly exhibits both a territorial *and* modern ring to state-society relations. For ISIL's ideologues, the state and the divine are two sides of the same coin, in that 'God becomes political, and politics becomes sacred' and, as McDonald argues, 'such sovereignty is completely absent in medieval culture, with its fragmented world and multiple sources of power. Its origins lie instead in the Westphalian system of states and the modern scientific revolution.'<sup>60</sup> As for the state-citizen relationship, ISIL is obsessed with

establishing a new Muslim subjectivity, exclusively in conjunction with an Islamic state. As such, ISIL shares what has been a norm for the European state system, that is, *'extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation), an idea that became transformed with the birth of modern European states into *extra stato nulla persona* (outside the state there is no legal personhood).<sup>61</sup>

The challenging new experiment in state-making exemplified by ISIL is not limited to the rise of the Caliphate as a new form of self-stylized sovereign entity. As a result of the armed struggle between state and non-state actors of different ethnic and sectarian political subjectivities in the new Middle East, post-Westphalian venues for collective consciousness are constructed around the discourse of popular resistance (i.e. Kurdish resistance against ISIL, Sunni resistance against Kurds and Shi'a, Shi'a resistance against Sunni, Houthi resistance against Sunni or *vice versa*). This in turn creates new modes and norms of social and political interaction for the region, which increasingly is witnessing a redefinition of the role and legitimacy of borders, as has been the case with the Syrian Kurds' so-called 'Rojava Revolution' in governance that radically alters both border politics and the politics of modern administration. The new cross-border or transnational re-bordering of political community and a new conception of homeland challenge the traditional structure of regional territorial order.<sup>62</sup>

This new type of territoriality and the antagonistic struggle certainly call attention to the tensions between societal and spatial relations at the regional level. Before the Arab Uprising, the main hegemonic discourse of popular resistance revolved around the idea of creating alternative, homogeneous, territorial national-states for different social groupings while mostly retaining the existing border structures. Today, however, new political subjectivities are being formed around cities (*Musul, Kirkuk, Raqqah*) or even squares (*al-maydan*) as the symbol of a new type of spatial resistance and struggle that acquires alternative political meaning and significance by way of either religious markers, such as *Dabiq* for ISIL, which means embracing the end-times, or nationalist markers, (e.g. *Kobane* is a starting point for the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan). The complex nature of this ongoing transition hence also includes changes in the "trans-border patterns of loyalty," constituting one venue for the 'new' in 'the new Middle East.'

The new political and ideological military antagonisms and popular resistances among different societal groups initiate a rethinking of the traditional ab-



**The absolute/collective violence and state of exception replace the rule of law, giving rise to the "politics of exceptionality" as a technique of government in the region**



stract formulations and institutional structures of the state, which have been traditionally designed in terms of *hierarchy*, the ‘legitimate’ use of force, and the rule of law. Under the contemporary experiments, however, state structures tend to stumble and anarchy prevails as the new normal, producing failed states such as Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. The absolute/collective violence and state of exception replace the rule of law, giving rise to the “politics of exceptionality” as a technique of government in the region. Such transformations turn states away from security provision as they become instead a source of insecurity, pushing sub-national ethnic and religious groups to form their own security architecture (i.e. Syria, Iraq and Libya). The resulting struggle of non-state armed groups for control over territory confronts states with a deep ISIL of security and identity. In Iraq, for example, the Kurds, Turkmen, Shi’a and Sunnis have turned to self-security provision for the sake of their own existence and interests, as a consequence of the weakness of the Iraqi state. Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen are almost a microcosm of the emerging new micro-geopolitical mechanism of survival engaging major actors as well as violent non-state armed actors.

In all, as this study hopes to have shown, the question of what is ‘new’ in the New Middle East should be scrutinized beyond the confines of narrow, ethnocentric accounts of ‘the new Middle East.’ In addressing the increasingly perilous fallouts from what we have named ‘the sixth revolt against the West’ (such as the refugee flow or the phenomenon of foreign fighters, to name a few) a new epistemological and political approach is due. ■

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