Introduction

One of the biggest challenges that has faced Arab societies in the last century is the building of a modern state—political entities including internationally recognized borders, legitimate governments and stable economies. Meeting the challenge has generated different ideologies, movements, ruling regimes, revolutions, military coups and wars. This chapter sheds theoretical and empirical light on why and how ruling regimes and societies in the Middle East have tried to meet the challenge. It addresses five key questions.

It first asks the indispensable but difficult question: what is a state? Second, how and why have states and the states-systems formed in the Middle East region? Third, how can we theoretically and conceptually understand the state in the Middle East? Fourth, what have been the main challenges, dilemmas, and consequences of state-building? Finally, what impact did state-building have on regime–society relations in the Arab world?

What is a state?

Attempts to define and understand the state have captured the imaginations of many philosophers and social scientists. Some have focused on the functions states deliver such as law and order and social services. Others have treated the state as an instrument of power used by specific political forces to dominate others in a given territory. But the definition that has endured several condemnations, interpretations and reinterpretations (Lottholz and Lemay-Hebert 2016), remains the one offered by the great German sociologist Max Weber.

In a lecture delivered in 1919, Weber argued that a state is “compulsory political organization” whose “administrative staff successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical forces in the enforcement of its order... within a given territory” (Weber 1978: 54, emphasis original). In Weber’s imagination, this definition does not reflect real states. Rather, it is an “ideal-type,” which we can use as a standard conceptual device to compare actual states with. Notice that the definition does not tell us why the state becomes the “compulsory” organization. Or why does it become the sole wielder of physical force? Or, crucially, how does it become the legitimate organization in the enforcement of order within a given territory?
Answering these questions required a historical and sociological investigation of specific cases. For example, another German sociologist, Norbert Elias (2000), examined what he labelled as the “monopolization process”—the centralization of violence and tax-collection in the state—to explain how the state emerged within Europe (see also Tilly 1990).

Likewise, understanding states and state formation in the Middle East requires a political, cultural, and historical investigation of its formation and development. As a starting point, it is important to unpack Weber’s definition of the state; precisely, to examine how and why political boundaries have emerged in the Middle East; how did various forces seek to monopolize the use of violence in building their states; how did they legitimize their rule within their societies; and, finally, what impact this had on regime–society relations in the Middle East region.

**State formation in the Middle East**

The modern state and regional state-system in the Middle East have two interrelated origins: the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (circa 1299–1920) and the gradual, but steady expansion of European influence in the region, which started in the eighteenth century. The Ottoman state was a multi-ethnic and religious empire that governed most of what we now call the Middle East (almost all the Arab states, Turkey and Israel) and Eastern Europe (including Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the Balkans and Greece). The empire was ruled by the Osman (Ottoman) dynasty and Islam was the dominant ideology that offered the cultural, religious, and legal values that contributed to keeping the predominantly Muslim empire intact. The Ottoman leader was, thus, both a sultan (a king in the traditional sense of the word) but also a Caliph (successor of Prophet Muhammed and a perceived guardian of Islam), which bestowed legitimacy.

The Ottoman Empire was a tributary state, primarily relying on the taxation of peasants and, thanks to the control of trade routes, tariffs. Thus, military expansion was crucial for Ottoman power and survival. But military expansion began to reach its limits in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, after which Ottoman power began to erode, leading to the loss of territories first at the peripheries (Eastern Europe and Greece) and then in Arab-Muslim territories in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Saouli 2012: 39–41).

Ottoman decline and European expansion to the empire’s territories reflected the clash of two different socio-economic and political systems: a traditional, largely agrarian and tributary, Ottoman Empire confronting a technologically advanced capitalist nation-state—such as Britain and France (Bromley 1994: 61; Hinnebusch 2003: 15). European competition over the “sick man of Europe” began to cultivate the seeds of the interaction of international powers with indigenous forces in the region. Let us call this feature the external–internal nexus, which continues until now to explain international penetration of the Middle East region. The expansion of European powers to the rest of the world, including the Middle East, was driven by the need for primary products for their growing industrial economies, markets for their products, and by a geopolitical struggle to control strategic areas, especially trade routes. In many ways, this expansion was a continuation of wars that started in Europe, and which, among other things, gave rise to modern European states as we know them today (Tilly 1990).

This European rivalry had two major implications for the birth of states in the Middle East. First, European expansion began to neutralize Ottoman power providing local leaders with a margin of opportunity to expand their own power. By playing off European powers against the Ottoman rulers, local leaders extracted recognition, a nascent territory (though the idea of national boundaries was not clear then), and relative autonomy. For example, Muhammad Ali Pasha, an Ottoman commander who was initially sent on an expedition to re-occupy Egypt after the French invasion of 1798, would then capitalize on his growing power in Egypt and...
European-Ottoman rivalries to lay the ground for the modern Egyptian state. Muhammad Ali started a dynasty, which would be toppled in 1952, built the Egyptian army, and developed Egypt’s socio-economic foundations. But economic weakness in Egypt and British fear of an Ottoman–German alliance led to the British occupation of the Suez Canal as a strategic route tying Europe and India.

Other examples are the sheikhdoms of the Arab peninsula and the Persian Gulf. In 1839, Britain occupied Aden as a “coaling station” en route to India. It then established protectorates in Bahrain (1881), Oman (1891), Kuwait (1899) and Qatar (1916). Known collectively as the “General Treaty of Peace,” these protectorates guaranteed British recognition of local leaders’ autonomy over their internal affairs and protection against external threats (Ottomans and European rivals); in return, the local leaders pledged not to align with other external powers. By occupying Egypt, Cyprus (1878), and establishing its power in the Persian Gulf, Britain secured its influence against French, German or Russian infiltration of the region (Saouli 2012: 41–4).

The second implication for the birth of the state in the region is European rivalry in the Middle East. When the Ottoman Empire aligned with Germany in World War I, Britain altered its policy, which traditionally had hoped to keep the Ottoman Empire intact to block further European infiltration of the region. Through a subvention policy, Britain mobilized Arab support, particularly of Sheriff Hussein in the Hejaz area, against the Ottoman Turks. The defeat of Germany in Europe, however, expedited the collapse of the empire. It offered France and Britain (and Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution) the opportunity to divide the Ottoman territories into spheres of influence under the Sykes–Picot Agreement (1916) and developed in the San Remo Conference (1920). The agreements gave Britain control over Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq; France over Lebanon, Syria and Mosul. The discovery of oil in Iran and attempts to block Russian southward expansion led Britain to occupy southern Iran (Saouli 2012: 39–41).

The division of the region into spheres of influence came to be called by the newly formed League of Nations the “mandate system.” This new concept, which was developed after World War I, gave victors of the war the “right” and authority to govern the former Ottoman territories and to help them transition into fully-fledged independent states. The mandate system cultivated the legal foundations for the future recognition of the new entities as proto-states.

But despite these legal frameworks and the growing acceptance of the norms of national independence, actual power remained in the hands of the European colonizers. The institutions that European powers established in the mandate states—such as the national armies, police, parliaments, and constitutions—and the alliances they forged at a local level aimed to institutionalize stability as a necessary condition for the realization of other economic and geo-strategic interests. This was particularly true in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq. In the princedoms of the Gulf—such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, and later the UAE and Qatar—the process of state-building was more organic. This had important implications on indigenous state-building trajectories in the region.

**Theorizing state-building: contexts and processes**

Before we examine actual state-building processes, it is crucial to conceptualize and theorize the process and the context in which it takes place. The demarcation of political/legal boundaries in the region by European powers and the establishment of institutions did not automatically give rise to consolidated national states. What emerged in the Middle East in this nascent period can be conceived as social fields. These are the contexts where states can form, develop, or even deform. The state, according to this approach, is not a fixed entity; it is, rather, a process of state formation or deformation. The state in its early formation is open to many possibilities.
A social field has several properties. First, a geographical and social space that is demarcated by a boundary (even if in reality the legitimacy of the boundary is contentious) that separates it from other social fields. Second, a social field includes a material structure, that is, the climatic and socio-economic conditions that shape the political processes in a field. For example, the history of Egypt cannot be separated from the presence of the Nile River, the concentration of the Egyptian population there, and the historical need for a “state” to organize irrigation, agriculture, or to police and adjudicate over social conflicts. Third, a cultural make-up, which involves the ethnic, religious, sectarian, tribal and linguistic make-up of a field. Lebanon’s contemporary state-building has, for example, been shaped by its sectarian make-up and the various attempts of sectarian leaders to control the state or find consociational arrangements to govern the divided society (Saouli 2012: 8–28).

The above three elements form the context or environment that enables or constrains political interactions (see Figure 3.1). But political interactions, as the model below reveals, generates another two properties. First is the political structure. This is the sphere where rival political leaders, parties, ideologies compete for power within a social field. These rivalries are, once again, shaped and constrained by the cultural and material spheres of the social field. In state-building processes, competition—violent or otherwise—among various political actors finds its resolution in another property of a social field: institutions. Building institutions “takes place in the context of powerful actors attempting to produce rules of interaction to stabilize their situation vis-à-vis other powerful and less powerful actors” (Fligstein 2001:108). For example, when we talk about a Saudi state, we are usually referring, among other things, to the institutions the Saudi monarchy built in the context of state-building to consolidate and reproduce Saudi power over other forces in the Saudi social field. These institutions include, but are

![Figure 3.1 Structure of state formation](adapted from Saouli 2012)
not limited to, security forces (army, police, intelligence), tax-collecting agencies, courts, and ideological organizations (ministry of education).

A social field demarcates the context in which state-building processes take place, but what about the process itself? Building new states involves the monopolization of three spheres of social and political life. First, the monopolization of the use of violence. This is not only a main element in Weber’s classic definition of the state; it is a pre-requisite in establishing an authority—legitimate or otherwise—in a social field. But to understand state-building, instead of taking the monopoly over the use of violence as a fixed element, we think of it as a socio-political process: monopolization (Elias 2000) or de-monopolization. By monopolizing the use of force, by controlling the security organs of a state, a political actor not only stabilizes its own domination, but also attempts to prevent its rivals from threatening its own power.

But monopolizing coercion is not sufficient to establish domination in state-building processes. Political actors (kings, parties, regimes) also have to monopolize, or at least have control over, the economic sphere. By collecting taxes from the population, imposing tariffs on trade, borrowing money from lenders, or by directly controlling the economy, dominating political actors secure the economic means to dominate. Thus, in European state formation, tax-collection was not only a key in war-making but also in state development towards democratic governance.

Finally, is the monopolization of the ideological sphere, which complements the other two areas. Through a religious idea (say Islamism), an ideology (such as Arab nationalism or socialism), or a tribal or sectarian identity, dominating forces legitimize their power, namely the use of violence. No ruler can constantly and comprehensively police each and every individual in its territory. Thus, dominating regimes rely on ideological frameworks that set certain norms of what is socially accepted or abhorred and laws that discipline and punish those who break them. These ideological frameworks are important as identity markers in nation-building processes, distinguishing the in-group from the out-group. They are also important as devices to mobilize the group against perceived or real enemies.

In state-building processes, especially for states in their early formation, the three spheres—coercion, economy, and ideology—are arenas of contestation. In reality, the spheres are interconnected; we separate them here only for a theoretical purpose. When a political actor manages to monopolize the three spheres, what emerges is a regime. A regime usually refers to a political system (presidential, parliamentary, monarchical). Or, as intended here, a regime is a coalition of forces that shares a common ideological and political goal and thus a need to dominate over other rival forces to realize its goal. The coalition emerges from a social field’s cultural make-up and from its socio-economic forces. When specific social forces make political claims—claims that relate to the distribution and reproduction of power—they enter into the political sphere of a social field. When they win the political battle and consolidate this victory, they then attempt to institutionalize their power. Institutional building or rebuilding then serves to reproduce the regime’s domination in a field. Thus, for example, when we talk about the former Syrian regime of Hafez al-Asad, we are actually referring to a coalition of forces composed of Asad, his family, his predominantly-Alawi allies in the security organs of the state, the Ba’th Party, and allied members in the Syrian business class etc. Asad’s regime used the institutions it inherited or built in Syria to reproduce the regime’s dominance; among other things, it dominated over the ideological sphere (by imposing one interpretation of the Ba’th ideology) and by controlling the security organs of the state and thus preventing its enemies from toppling it (Saouli 2018; Hinnebusch 2001).

But political domination inevitably generates resistance. Thus, all regimes that aimed to build states in the region faced resistance from oppositional forces. The political activity of this
opposition—be it social movements, political parties, or political leaders—has aimed to challenge the regime’s monopoly of the spheres discussed above. For example, Islamist movements in the twentieth century aimed to de-monopolize the regimes’ control of the ideological sphere in countries such as Syria, Egypt, Jordan or Iraq by offering alternative ideologies, ones, which they hoped, would challenge a regime’s legitimacy. Sometimes the ideological and political challenges took a violent dimension (as Syria in 1978–82; Iraq, 1975–9; Egypt and Algeria in the 1990s), which aimed to break the regime’s monopoly over coercion. But the fight over the control of coercive forces in some cases took place within the army, leading to successive military coups, especially in the republics of Syria, Yemen, Iraq or Libya (Saouli 2012: 22–3).

Resisting dominant regimes is more than mere opposition to a ruling government. In early state-building processes, these oppositional forces can be understood as potentially alternative regimes: political forces that carry an ideological and political vision of the state, nation and society. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of social fields in the Middle East raised crucial questions about the identity of the peoples of the region (Islamic, Arab or otherwise), the political boundaries that should map the region or the appropriate ideology (socialism, nationalism) that should govern the society. Starting in the nineteenth century, Arab and Islamic thinkers offered various visions and answers to these questions (see Nassar 1986, 2017). But it was in the twentieth century that these visions began to materialize in and through political contestations within and among states in the region. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, countries like Syria or Lebanon were politically grappling with several ideological currents: Arab nationalism, Syrian Nationalism, Lebanese Nationalism and, gradually, Islamism. At a regional level, Egypt’s Jamal Abdel Nasser’s Arab Nationalist ideology was competing with Saudi Arabia’s Islamism for regional influence. It was an Arab “cold war” (Kerr 1971).

Resisting dominating regimes and the scramble for power within regimes has also involved the activation and mobilization of tribal, ethnic, sectarian or religious identities in state-building processes. Despite their ostensibly secular, Arab Nationalist regimes, in both Syria and Iraq, we observe from the 1960s a gradual attempt to activate sectarian, tribal and familial ties to consolidate the regimes of Hafez Asad and Saddam Hussein, respectively. These domestic ideological and identity divides added more pressure on the consolidation and development of the state in the Middle East (Saouli 2015, 2018).

The internal–external nexus: vulnerability and the democracy deficit

The above historical and theoretical analyses so far suggest that the Arab state remains in the process of early formation, a process that can take the state either in the direction of consolidation and legitimization or in the direction of deformation. Faced by oppositional movements, regimes can lose control over the process of state-building; states can collapse. State collapse and civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Algeria or Lebanon in the last few decades offer numerous insights on the process of state deformation.

But there is another feature that has presented major challenges to the consolidation of the Arab state: vulnerability to external subvention. In addition to being a state in the early process of formation, the Arab state is a late-comer to the international system. Whilst the making of European states was concomitant with the emergence of a European states-system, states in the Middle East came late to an already existing international states-system. Indeed, as we saw above, this international states-system, dominated by European powers, played a key role in the making of the Arab state. Thanks to the region’s geopolitical location and natural resources, external intervention continues to impact the formation and development of the states in the region. State formation or deformation is, thus, not a purely internal affair. How?
To start with, it is important to recognize that regimes and societies in the Middle East had to simultaneously cope with three monumental goals (which in European history required four centuries to realize): state-consolidation, nation-building; national independence; and democratization. This created major challenges and dilemmas for the late-forming states. The main dilemma faced by many regimes in the region was the concurrent need to, on the one hand, legitimize their rule through political incorporation (democratization) and, on the other hand, to survive in power as a ruling regime. As mentioned above, these regimes came to power with national and political visions which, if they were to succeed, they would have had to suppress rival movements. The dilemma: if you incorporate other political forces to increase state legitimacy, you risk eroding your own regime’s power and ideological project. Not surprisingly, regimes choose the survival of their power and ideological project (Saouli 2012: 50–61). In the literature, this has come to be called authoritarian maintenance, which has varied from one case to the other.

But choosing regime survival generated further dilemmas for ruling elites. To consolidate their power and to prevent external intervention in their states, ruling regimes repressed the opposition; however, in doing so, they gradually weakened the legitimacy of their regimes and increased the vulnerability of their states to external intervention (Saouli 2012, 52–67). First, domestic insecurity due to intra-regime rivalries, fear of the opposition, and intervention by external rivals, required controlling state institutions by installing key allies in strategic positions. It also required controlling everything that is political in the state: ideology, media, education etc. Put simply; this involved the deepening of the authoritarian system and the contracting of political power to a ruling family and a dictator (e.g. Asad’s Syria, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq or Mu’amar Qadafi’s Libya). But, ironically, as various regimes were deepening their dominance, their political power was eroding. By relying on kinship, tribal or sectarian ties to consolidate their power, ruling elites weakened the influence of ideology (say Arab nationalism) as a device in nation-building or as a unifying ideology for the regime. Worse, they contributed to the mobilization and reproduction of identity divides existing at the cultural sphere of their societies. With time, oppositional forces would draw on these identities to rally against the regimes (examples including the Muslim Brothers in Syria or Dawa Party in Iraq in the 1970s) (Saouli 2018, 2019).

Second, regime erosion internally deepened its vulnerability to external forces. Domestic political opposition and accumulated grievances offered rival external forces of the regime the opportunity to weaken it, easing—once again, not without irony—external intervention in the state. For example, Saddam Hussein’s attempts to consolidate his power internally and to limit external intervention in his country generated an unintended consequence: gradually, and since the 1970s, we observe an increase in internal opposition and external intervention (through the support of his opposition), leading to the swift crumbling of the regime after the US-led invasion of 2003.

These dilemmas have generated a weak Arab state. Weak, not in its ability to exercise political control in society—on this level, many Arab states are quite strong, or indeed fierce. But weak in terms of legitimacy. But this theory needs a qualification.

The effect of the dilemma on various Arab states has varied. Some cases have fared better than others. In the largely homogeneous and oil-rich monarchies—such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait—the trajectory of state formation differed from the heterogeneous societies of Syria, Iraq, Yemen or Libya. In the monarchies, the ruling families came from the tribal, religious and social make-up of society. They did not seek to override tribal ties through secular and/or nationalist ideologies. They have designed and controlled institutions to reproduce their power, incorporating allied tribes and social forces and punishing rebellious ones. Rent from oil and its allocation through social provisions (schools, national health services, employment...
in the state) helped to consolidate and reproduce monarchical rule and, to varying degrees, guarantee the loyalty and acquiescence of citizens. Finally, external factors have also contributed to limiting the effect of the dilemma. Allied to the West (first Britain and then the US), Arab monarchies have carefully formulated status-quo foreign policies to prevent the emergence of regional hegemons or powers that would threaten their states. For example, in the 1960s, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco played key roles as counter-balance forces against the Arab Nationalist movement and regimes, especially Nasserite Egypt and Ba’thist Syria and Iraq. Since 1979, Saudi Arabia has also been the countervailing force against Iranian Islamist revolutionism. These internal and external policies have helped maintain both regimes as powers and the territorial states of monarchical regimes. But they have not, yet, overcome the democracy deficit (Saouli 2012: 74–98).

As we shall see below, the effect of the dilemma on heterogeneous societies has been more damaging. Divided into religious, sectarian or ethnic communities, heterogeneous societies offer the cultural elements (see the social field model above) that can be easily activated or politicized by political actors in processes of state-building and during episodes of political contention. This has had an important effect on political change and continuity in Arab politics.

Regime–society relations: political change and continuity

State-building, as you have gathered so far, is a dynamic process. At best, it is an attempt by a regime to establish social and political order within a given territory. These attempts have faced major hurdles and resistance by affected forces. State-building in the region has seen periods of stability, but also episodes of contentious politics that offered new horizons for political change. But in the process, these populist regimes faced opposition, not least from the Islamist movement that offered a different ideological vision to the largely secular and Arab Nationalist regimes. Authoritarianism (see above), failure to sustain state-driven economic development, and defeat in war (as in the 1967 war with Israel) had by the late 1970s weakened the legitimacy of post-independence regimes. Capitalizing on these developments, Islamist movements mobilized against regimes during several episodes of collective violence. Ba’thist Syria was in a civil war in 1978–82, when the regime was fighting the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), of which membership was punishable by death. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein’s regime repressed the Da’wa (Islamist-Shi’a) Party, and also made membership of the movement punishable by death. After the Islamists won the first round of the elections in Algeria, the military intervened to overturn the results leading to a bloody war in the 1990s. For most of the 1980s and 1990s, Arab regimes were fighting for survival whilst adapting, through economic liberalization, controlled political openings, and pragmatic foreign policies, to rising challenges.

But in 2011, Arab societies revolted against their regimes, once again opening new horizons for political change and state-rebuilding. These Uprisings—leaderless revolts from below—shook the foundations of the regimes that rose to power in the 1960s and threatened the legitimacy of monarchies. As opposed to the norms of Arab nationalism, national independence, and Palestine liberation, which predominated in the twentieth century, the latest revolts emphasized freedom from the ruling regimes, human dignity against the police state, and democracy. The fast pace of the revolts exposed regimes’ weaknesses; in the course of a few weeks, the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt were toppled. The Uprisings also highlighted the vulnerability of the state;
in a few months, the states of Syria, then Libya, and then Yemen collapsed and transformed into battlefields of regional and international forces.

The Uprisings generated revolutions and democratic transition (as in Tunisia), counter-revolutions (Egypt, Bahrain), civil wars (Syria, Iraq, Yemen) and regime resilience (Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait) (Hinnebusch 2018). The varying outcomes of the Arab Uprisings reflected how different factors had shaped regime–society relations in these countries and included: state-building trajectories, cultural make-up of the state, geopolitical location, economic resources and the position of the army in the political system (Saouli 2012: 63–7). But the outcomes also reflected the effect of the immediate regional and international political conditions.

Egypt and Tunisia, for example, swiftly toppled their autocrats (Husni Mubarak and Ben Ali, respectively). As largely homogeneous societies, with relatively robust national identities, both countries initially managed to transition to democracy. During the transition, contentious issues were centred on political and ideological differences (Islamists versus non-Islamists; nature of the constitution, etc.). But whilst in Tunisia, the army had traditionally been less political, in Egypt the army, since the 1952 revolution, formed the backbone of the state. On the other hand, whilst in both countries the Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, had a strong presence, in Tunisia secular political parties and labour syndicates formed a strong and organized countervailing power to the Islamist. This political pluralism, and the army’s neutrality, paved the way to constitutional changes and the transition to democracy. The case of Egypt reflected a political divided society. The MB, one of the oldest and most ambitious oppositional movements in the Arab world, hoped to capitalize on the fall of Mubarak to advance its own political agenda; but this stood against the political wishes of many Egyptians who feared the Islamization of state and society. Political polarization, absence of a united political opposition and the military which was eager to regain its position in the system, led to a popular military coup in 2013 that toppled the first freely elected (MB) president of Egypt. The return of the army, which later brought Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi to the presidency, stalled the transition to democracy and reproduced the previous authoritarian system. This outcome in Egypt was not only due to internal affairs. The political polarization in Egypt mirrored a regional struggle between the MB alliance led by Turkey and Qatar and its rivals, namely Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who supported and recognized al-Sisi.

The internal–external nexus, once again, continued to shape regime–society struggles and state-building in the Middle East. But it was in Syria where this nexus had its greatest impact. To start with, even before the Arab revolts of 2011, Syria was vulnerable. Its state-building trajectory had deepened its authoritarian regime, as we saw, at a theoretical level above. Elements of its heterogeneous society (a majority of Sunni-Arabs, with significant and influential minorities: Alawites, Christians, Druzes, Ismailis and Kurds) were politicized during the state-building process. Its geopolitical location, bordering Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq combined with its 30-year-old alliance with Iran and Hizbollah also made Syria vulnerable to external factors. When the Uprising took place in March 2011, the regime was suddenly exposed to domestic and external threats. Internally, like their peers in the Arab world, many Syrians hoped to topple the authoritarian regime and to enact democratic changes. But having carefully detected the changes in Tunisia and Egypt, the Syrian regime responded swiftly and violently, preventing the rise and mobilization of a united opposition. The regime used techniques of regime survival which it had accumulated during its long reign: violent repression; delegitimizing the opposition as collaborators allied to foreign enemies or as terrorists intending to cause chaos in Syria; accusing the Islamist opposition of intending to Islamize the state and society and, thus, activating sectarian identities, particularly the fears and emotions of minorities (Hinnebusch and Saouli 2019).
Externally, the Syrian regime’s rivals capitalized on the domestic revolt and the regime’s violent response to it to promote their agenda of removing Asad and, thus, weakening and isolating his regional allies—Iran and Hizbollah—who in turn hoped to keep Asad in power. By the end of 2011, Syria was fast collapsing into a bloody civil war. What initially appeared as a “strong” and stable Syrian “state” turned out to be nothing but one force, a regime—or a coalition of forces—in a politically-divided and externally penetrated country. By 2017, Syria was penetrated by among other states, Iranian, Turkish, American, Russian and numerous other pro and anti-regime armed political movements (such as Hizbollah).

The developments in Syria (but also Iraq, Libya or Yemen) reflect the failure of state-building in these heterogeneous societies. The Arab revolts, on the other hand, tested the resilience of Arab monarchies. A few weeks after the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak, Arab monarchies activated the techniques of regime survival. Oil-rich countries increased the salaries of state employees, extended social welfare programmes and pumped money into the economy. Kuwait, for one example, offered money and food staples for each citizen. Except for Qatar, which supported the Arab Uprisings, state religious organs demonized the Arab revolts accusing protesters of fomenting fitna (sedition) and causing disorder in Arab societies. Poor monarchies of Morocco and Jordan used tried and tested tools of political manipulation: offering some constitutional and political concessions to the opposition whilst manipulating their ideological and political divides to maintain a dominant role for the monarchy. They hoped, and largely succeeded, in riding out the political storm.

Regime resilience in the monarchy was not a mere domestic affair. Political disorder, civil wars, sectarian mobilization, and international intervention in various cases (Syria, Iraq, Libya Egypt) did not offer a positive demonstration effect for societies in the monarchies. The monarchies continued to offer two crucial provisions: order and social welfare. These domestic and regional developments limited the spread of the norm of democracy. Aware of the dangers of democratic transition, Arab monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, played a key role in influencing developments in other cases. In the wake of the Arab Uprisings, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) invited Jordan and Morocco to join the club of rich monarchies. Although this invitation did not materialize, it did reflect the anxiety of the GCC. Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in Bahrain and quelled the (predominantly-Shi’a) Uprising that threatened to topple the monarchy. And along with the UAE, it offered financial backing to Jordan, Bahrain and Morocco—and after the military coup in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE financially backed al-Sisi (Kamrava 2012).

Conclusion

The latest episodes of contentious politics have, thus, tested the Arab states, regimes and regime–society relations. The outcomes reflect varying state-building trajectories, a country’s geopolitical location, its social composition and its economic resources. But despite all of this, there is one constant: the resilience of the state as a territorial entity. Despite the hope and attempts of various Islamist (including the latest attempt by the so-called Islamic State which captured large swathes of territories from Iraq and Syria) and Arab Nationalist movements, the national territorial state continues to map the political world of the Arabs. For many Arab societies and individuals, the state (what we conceptualized here as the social field) has become the natural landscape that shapes their political imaginations, visions and identities.

But, whilst Arab societies have, intentionally or not, demarcated the boundaries of the state, these states continue to face major challenges. First is the establishment of legitimate governments—namely, governments elected by the people. Except for Tunisia (and maybe Lebanon and Iraq), most Arab regimes and societies continue to struggle over the question of
legitimate authority. Economic hurdles (unemployment, corruption etc.), higher literacy rates and diffusion of democratic norms (elections, accountability, participation) will very likely intensify the quest for legitimate authority. The second is the contestation over identities, especially in heterogeneous societies, which will continue to shape the politics of these countries and their foreign policies. This also includes the struggle over the position of Islam in the politics and societies of the Arab world. The last is economic development. Apart from the oil-rich countries that have managed to modernize their economies and with varying degrees diversify them, other Arab countries (especially Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon) continue to face serious difficulties (such as high unemployment rates among university graduates) in developing stable economies. Democratic deficit, identity divides and economic constraints may well make this century one of political protest that may reconfigure regime–society relations in the region and bring the Arab state closer to Weber’s imagination.

Notes
1 This chapter draws on my previous studies on the topic (Saouli 2006, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2019).
2 Contentious politics refers to the “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants” (McAdam et al. 2001: 5).

References
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