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The Rise and Fall of Islamic State:

The Fading Influence of Political Islam in the Middle East

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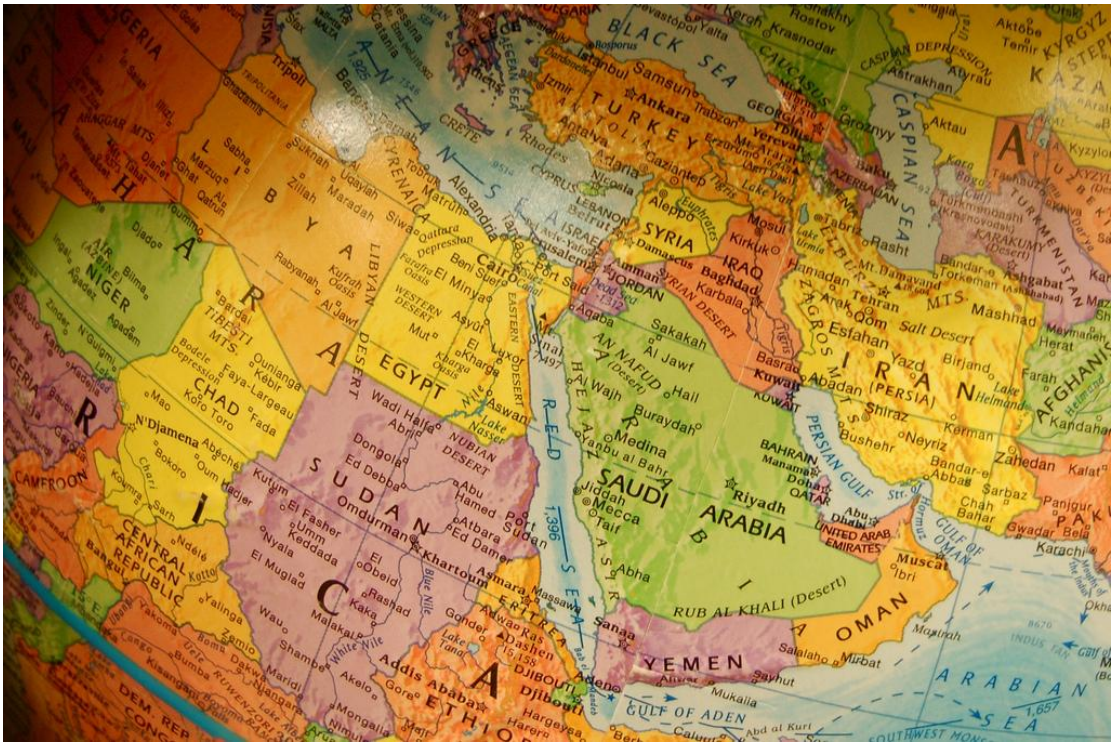

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Introduction

On the 29th of January 2014, a man dressed in a traditional black thobe climbed the minbar of the magnificent centuries-old al-Nuri mosque – well-known for its leaning minaret overlooking Mosul – and declared the (re)establishment of an Islamic caliphate. His name was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph of the Islamic State (IS). The eponymous organisation pledged to bring an end to the 'Sykes-Picot borders' – a reference to the border drawn in the Middle East after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the First World War – and to offer an alternative to the un-Islamic, despotic and corrupted Arab rule in the region. While the world received the unprecedented announcement with a degree of fascination and puzzlement, we wondered what the scope of this declaration would be and what it would mean for other violent and non-violent actors advocating for the centrality of Islam in social and political affairs of Muslims. And so, we embarked on a four year exploration of the IS which took us to Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia. We were looking at the IS in the context of the post-2010 Arab uprisings.[1] On our journey, we interacted with policy makers, academics, journalists, civil society organisations, religious leaders and ordinary citizens who had sometimes been displaced by the region's raging conflicts. We also travelled across centuries, trying to situate – to better make sense of – the rise of IS in the development and evolution of political Islam in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and its most violent form, Salafi-jihad. Adopting this historical approach, coupled with our detailed analysis of IS' discourse over the three years of its Caliphate (June 2014-July 2017) helped us identify and catalogue the core characteristics and claims of the IS. In doing so, we identified the weaknesses at the heart of the group's programme and the structural shortcomings of its mission. These are of course common trait of Islamists – whether they use violent or peaceful means to achieve their goals – in the MENA region, but to us none had thus far had the effect and influence of this Caliphate.

The Fragmentation of the Regional Order

At first glance, the Arab core of the MENA region appears quite homogeneous; that is to

say a shared cultural space, a shared language which is itself rooted in the dominant religion of the Arabs, geographical contiguity, shared experience of anti-colonial struggles, and a unifying mission (liberation of Palestine and the building of Arab unity). And yet the region is perhaps unique on the global stage for providing a vivid example of fragmentation, or what we have identified as 'de-regionalisation'.

The seeds of de-regionalisation were arguably sown on the territorial dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in the 1910s and the European division of (largely) Arab populations into incongruence territorial states following the First World War. Ultimately, this act fuelled revisionary and secular pan-Arab mobilisation. Despite the mass popularity of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s, the struggle for domination of the regional system brought divisions to its Arab core. In other words, the seeds of fragmentation were planted in the 'elitisation' of Arabism. For its top down politics, this mass movement became emasculated. As a consequence, almost all of the regional bodies which followed the establishment of the Arab League in 1945 have been subregional in nature, which has merely deepened Arab regional fissures. The failure of collective regional structures – such as the United Arab Republic (UAR; 1958–1961) and the Iraq–Jordan Arab Federation (1958) – and ideological confrontations between nationalist regimes resulted in dynamic and shifting regional alliances, thus never allowing the struggle to be settled to the satisfaction of any party. Of course, non-Arab states carry their fair share of the blame for the dysfunctionality of the Arab regional system. The MENA regional system has had to accommodate powerful non-Arab actors, many of whose, often hostile, interactions have tended to be with their Arab counterparts and within the Arab region's geo-cultural space. Iran and Israel, for example, have confronted each other on Lebanese soil through Iran's proxy (Hezbollah) and on Syrian soil since the start of the mass uprising there. Turkey and Iran, also, have continued to make their political and military presence in Syria felt since 2012. The continuing destructive involvement of the non-Arab state actors in the region has been continuously criticised from most sides in the Arab region. But it remains the case that the thickness of, and the often-adversarial, exchanges in the region have tended to be inter-Arab and, beyond that, intra-Arab. Pan-Arabism was soon replaced by a much more radical creed, that of

religious extremism. Indeed, due to the Arab nationalist states' violent suppression of dissent, voices on the spectrum of reawakening or resistance were muffled and could now only speak through the language of religion – of Islam. Politically revitalised Islamism not only opposed President Nasser's Arab nationalism but also put forward an alternative Islam-based political narrative and programme.

The ideological shift took place in a region characterised by the absence of security, reinforced by power competition among regional powers, the absence of economic convergence, and the, often negative, active intervention of major powers. The MENA region was also dominated by authoritarian political systems which helped to hinder collective action based on some power-sharing arrangements. In the end, the MENA became a securitised region built on conflict and violence, and the prevalence of authoritarian political systems reduced national decision-making to a handful of individuals who were more concerned about regime survival than collective governance. Finally, great and major powers maintained a strong presence and their interventions in North Africa, the Persian Gulf subregion and the Levant came to leave a political and security mark on the regional system. Such external interventions, arguably, have added to inter-Arab tensions and regime security concerns and thus have extended the distance in reaching regional dialogue. [2] The predicament of the Arab state system, squeezed from outside and challenged from within, is the story of MENA's de-regionalised reality.

While the people's struggle for freedom and justice during the uprisings that spread like wildfire from December 2010 called for a new regional paradigm, surviving elites used national security agendas to build more walls and barriers to interstate-level interactions.

Finally, regional disintegration was fuelled by systemic shift, namely the relative demise of American hegemony in the region and the commensurate rise of competing actors with no vision, limited vision, or indeed competing visions for the region. The United States' (US) inability to establish order in the region while driving to secure its strategic hold in East Asia has been perceived as not just weakness but deliberate neglect. [3] It is evident that in the absence of American leadership no other major power is able or prepared to take the lead in managing the region's chaos.

Ultimately, de-regionalisation not only eroded state structures but also provided the permissive environment in which such non-state actors as the Muslim Brotherhood and much more violent and disruptive al-Qaeda could flourish.

The Arab State Falters and the Islamic Caliphate Rises

With the establishment of the nation-state system in the MENA region in the aftermath of the First World War, the religious legitimacy of the Ottoman Empire was replaced by the political legitimacy of the new Westphalian state system. Because the process of creating the nation-state system was exogenous, it created artificial and weak states.[4] The imposition of new states in the Arab core of the region triggered the emergence of cross-border ideologies, which emerged as pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism. These ideologies not only challenged the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the new states; they challenged the legitimacy of the new political elites, causing a long-lasting crisis of the state in the region.

Tensions, which had flared up in the 1960s over Yemen and, again, over Kuwait in 1990, turned into a full-blown crisis. The 'de-sovereignisation' of Iraq in 2003, during which the regional system proved its incapability to protect the sovereignty of its members, came to epitomise the problem. With the erosion of the state, the substate actors emerged to claim their own monopoly of power. In addition, the centralised approach of nation building in the Arab core resulted in the emergence of sultanistic regimes who attained legitimacy mostly by coercive means. It was arguably a result of state control, intransigence, and an unwillingness to share power or to be held accountable, which led to the Arab uprisings in December 2010 onwards – a massive expression of discontent with regimes and the states they had built. The uprisings, however, caused more damage to the state. While the juridical and the territorial sovereignty of the monarchical states – along with the legitimacy of the royal families – remained relatively immune from this structural shift, some of the republican states could not survive the storm. The uprisings cracked organisational and juridical sovereignty of the state. At the same time, protests and the dangers they posed to regime security reproduced authoritarian tendencies and caused legitimacy deficit of some of the surviving political elites. The legitimacy deficit, compounding state weakness, created

a power vacuum that led to the penetration of the state system by substate actors, mainly those who subscribed to religious dogma. Hence, one could argue that political Islam is a reactive phenomenon. This is especially true in the case of Salafi-jihadism, whose fourfold symmetry discourse – that is to say monotheism and the excommunication of Muslims, the global theory of Islam, and loyalty and repudiation – was a product of a series of political events in the Muslim world. Salafi-jihadism and the justification for political violence was arguably reinforced by fratricide conflicts in and beyond the MENA region, especially the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Kuwait crisis. After the removal of Saddam Hussein by American troops in 2003, the Salafi-jihadi response to foreign occupation exceeded the level of brutality and savagery already witnessed in Afghanistan. Going beyond their usual assaults against Western targets, Salafi-jihadi groups started using incommensurate violence against Muslim communities. It is also in the context of post-2003 Iraq that the notion of jihad was elevated to an offensive strategy aimed at controlling land and re-establishing the Islamic state lost at the hands of Western powers after the First World War.

On the most violent end of the spectrum of Islamist groups, the IS, the subject of much of our enquiry in our AHRC-funded research project, has been somewhat different from the other Salafi-jihadi organisations operating in the MENA region. While the IS was born in the same fires of conflict and arbitrary violence which gave birth to al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria, the IS has nevertheless behaved very differently from the others. The IS very much grew out of the chaos of post-2003 war in Iraq following the destruction of the regime created by Saddam Hussein. The period that followed the American intervention provided fertile ground for grievances that developed into a crisis of identity, legitimacy, and order; the sense of abandonment; the marginalisation and insecurity running through the Sunni communities of the country; and, finally, jihadis' disappointment in the achievements of militants in their own ranks. The failures of al-Qaeda to fight the American occupation in Iraq, compounded by the crisis of state sovereignty in Iraq and Syria and the general weakness in the regional Arab order, provided the ideal conditions for jihadis of much greater ambition to burst onto the scene in 2014 and declare the establishment of a 'proper' caliphate for the first time in centuries. The

IS suggested a 'post-Sykes–Picot order' – in reference to the Franco-British agreement that decided on the division of the Ottoman Empire – that would implement a new division of the people on the basis of infidelity rather than a division based on country, race, or tribe.[5]

The Resonance of IS' Discourse in the MENA

In addition to its violent military campaign aimed at expanding the territory of its caliphate, the IS put tremendous effort towards the creation of a discourse targeted at delegitimising its foes and promoting its agenda in the MENA and beyond. We refer to these efforts as a 'discursive offensive' or a 'discursive assault'. Both terms denote the fact that the discourse and the militancy on the ground should be regarded as the two faces of the same coin, essentially aimed at winning the battle against the enemies of the caliphate. They also account for IS' awareness that articulating and promoting its world-view in a distinct discourse was an integral component of its war for the establishment of a global Islamic state.

Our analysis of more than 162 official media outlets deployed by the group suggests that the caliphate saw itself as the most legitimate form of governance amidst regional turmoil. For them the failure of nation-states to fulfil their role of representing and protecting the Umma – the Muslim community worldwide – had made the IS a necessity. While we situate the rise and establishment of IS as a consequence of the failure of regional and national political projects since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it appears that the IS capitalised on those same dynamics and foresaw greater fragmentation of the MENA order as a result of internal and external quarrels for regional domination. According to the IS, the Umma went through a protracted crisis, caused by the ancient enmity of the Crusaders – referring to Western, traditionally Christian, powers. The illegitimate rulers that were put in power after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire subsequently rejected Islam and the Sharia to form a society governed by man-made laws. Considering the IS' discourse, it clearly appears that the group saw the aftermath of the First World War not as a mere reconfiguration of existing political structures but as an affront to the Muslims who evolved from rulers to ruled-over, from free and independent to imprisoned in artificial national borders and submissive to the Arab tyrants and their 'Crusader masters'.

In other words, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire is described not only as a simple political transformation but also as a deep emotional trauma for Islam and the Muslims. Consequently, the IS portrayed Islam and its fundamental values under the wrath of Western powers, which dispossessed the Umma of its lands and core identity. Muslims eventually lost control and legitimacy over their own lives. In the words of al-Adnani, the "cursed" and "artificial" borders should henceforth be "erased from the map and removed from the hearts".[6] Such representations helped the IS frame the conflicts in Iraq and Syria as another invasion of the Muslim lands and as the undeniable proof that the crisis of the Ummah would be endless unless the cycle is broken. While this discourse entailed unrivalled violence against the 'enemies of the caliphate', endogenous realities such as the debatable outcome of the Arab uprisings as popular claims for accrued accountability and legitimacy would have given substance to IS' argument about the lack of legitimacy of the regional order. In the MENA region, the legitimacy of the state as a territorial unit of governance remains debatable.

In-depth interviews with over a hundred residents echoed several arguments articulated by the IS in its discourse. Most notably, the ruling elites and the national borders – along with the resulting imposition of a national identity – are still considered by many as illegitimate and are still seen as imposed by Western powers. The shadow of Western influence has never really stopped hanging over the region, reinforcing the popular sentiment of being ruled over by distant elites. In fact, the geostrategic alliance between Arab leaders and foreign actors to secure the formers' power, often at the expense of local populations, has inspired prominent academic work.[7] It follows that the rebellion against the foreign occupation in the region, and resistance to the existence of a 'Jewish' state at the heart of Arab Muslim countries, remains a powerful argument for (violent) mobilisation and for the promotion of a common identity around a common struggle. The wave of popular protests that spread across the region from December 2010 was a blatant example of the perceived lack of political legitimacy. In Iraq and Syria particularly, decades of chronic illegitimacy opened a transnational power vacuum that was quickly filled with a myriad of armed groups drawing on a religious discourse to destabilise the established order. These dynamics arguably played a role in the initial support for IS' revisionary programme that

opposed both the nation-state system and the corrupted ruling minorities. In other words, the IS promoted a form of Islamic populism which aimed at providing freedom from the domination of foreign powers while regaining dignity and providing tangible resources to an Umma conceived to be both downtrodden and homogeneous. In that sense, the Caliphate represented a reformist postmodern answer to failed governance, the popular disenchantment in politics and ruling elites, and the perceived threat to Islamic historical and socio-political heritage in the MENA region.

The Arab State Resists and the Islamic Caliphate Crumbles

While the structural shifts of de-regionalisation and erosion of state power led to the rise of the IS, the latter, in return, caused further de-regionalisation and erosion of state power by pushing itself as a living and viable alternative to the Sykes-Picot order. At the regional level, the war against the revisionist Islamic caliphate added more fuel to the raging fires as it represented another source of power competition and legitimacy in the MENA region.

At the regional level, the Arab states produced two military alliances to fight the same enemy; the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition and Russia-Syria-Iran-Iraq coalition. Yet, these alliances were merely manifestations of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and characterised by the conflicting identities and national interests of their founding members. Capitalising on regional strife, Russia for example saw the opportunity to reaffirm its presence in the region, which reinforced the impression that the region remains at the mercy of external forces and powers. As for regional organisations – the Arab League and, to a lesser extent, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – they mostly relied on the efforts made by the United Nations, the United States, and Saudi Arabia to counter jihadi violence. In North Africa, the moribund Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) was unable to take effective regional counterterrorism measures. Instead, its members installed hard borders and fences to restrict the flow of the jihadists, mainly the IS and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb movements. Although this strategy limited the movement of the jihadi groups, it hindered regionalisation progressions and restricted the movement of people and goods across national borders.

At the state level, countries adopted different strategies to confront IS' extra-territorial strategy. Our research investigated the responses of Jordan and Tunisia to preserve their sovereignty and impose their legitimacy in the face of IS' revisionist political programme in the MENA region. In Jordan, regional proximity to Iraq and Syria and the steady Islamisation of its socio-political environment since the 1960s rendered the kingdom particularly vulnerable. Besides, Jordan, the hob of the Mashreq, proved to have been highly sensitive to regional instability, which broadcasted the country's dependence on foreign powers for protection. Hence, it was evident that the Syrian crisis would have a spill over effect on the already fragile political and economic situation of the kingdom. Finally, the lack of political reforms and the absence of a religious and political counter-discourse fed the grievances of the Jordanians and endangered the state's resilience to Salafi-jihadi groups such as the IS but also al-Qaeda branch in Syria, al-Nusra Front – to be renamed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in January 2017. The painful murder of the Jordanian pilot by IS in February 2015, however, finally released the pressure from the government to act and unified the domestic fronts against the group. In the words of State Minister for Media Affairs, Mohammad Mumani, Jordan developed a strategy to fight terrorism based on a holistic approach combining military, security, and ideological approaches.[8]

In Tunisia, although the country was far from the stronghold of the IS in Syria and Iraq, it was not immune to the group's extra-territorial strategy, which established a presence next door in Libya. Post-2011, Salafi-jihadism grew quickly as a response to what democracy and political Islam of al-Nahda could not deliver. Following the assassination of Chokri Belaïd and Mohammed Brahmi in 2013, however, the government felt that violence had reached the threshold, so it acted fast to end the jihadi threat. It carried out a counterterrorism strategy not only against IS but all domestic and transnational jihadi networks, namely Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi and Ansar al-Shariah (AST). The repressive campaign – focused on securitisation – led to the elimination of AST in 2015 and successfully thwarted several further terror attacks. Eventually, the March 2016 failed attempt to seize the city of Ben Guerdane was a decisive victory against Salafi-jihad in Tunisia.

On June 29, 2017, three years after the funding of the Islamic State, former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced

"the end of the Daesh state of falsehood".[9] On March 23, 2019, the US-backed alliance of Syrian fighters announced that the IS had lost the last pocket of territory it controlled, bringing a formal and definitive end to the caliphate that once controlled over 88,000 square kilometres and ruled over eight million people.[10]

Political Islam on the Run

Over the past decade, political Islam has faced great challenges as it has tried to reshape the identity and structure of the state and turn the grievances of the masses against the governing elites into a momentum for their reformist programmes. Our analysis suggests that political Islam has failed to deliver on its agenda and has thus failed to fulfil the aspirations of its many followers as well. Today, we posit, political Islam in the MENA region, in both its violent and non-violent forms, is fading away.

Despite the violence they used to disrupt the established order in the region, non-state actors such as al-Qaeda and IS have achieved limited success. On the one hand, the IS eventually failed to attract general and sustained support, or to reshape the socio-political identity of the Arab states and their inhabitants. In the words of the majority of the participants in our research, the IS replaced one form of tyranny – the secular tyranny of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and the US-imposed regime in Iraq – with another form of pseudo-religious tyranny. Our analysis suggests that the bulk of the populations interviewed – while identifying with their Islamic heritage and identity – reject the strict application of the Sharia law that would not be contextualised in space and time.

On the other hand, we make the argument that the strategic mistake of the Islamic State was to territorialise its mission, which then gave its opponents a clear target to attack and destroy. The group's return to guerrilla warfare since the loss of its 10 million-strong 'state' in 2019 is indicative of the difficulties associated with the pursuit of jihad from fixed locations. In this regard, al-Qaeda continues to pose the greatest threat and challenges order in the Arab region, but this organisation too is vulnerable and its role in securitising the region has rendered the ruling regimes more prone to use unrestrained force against them and indeed against any form of dissent. Despite latent crises and its brittleness, we conclude that the Arab state has proved resilient and managed to reassert

itself in the face of the threat to its legitimacy and its identity posed by jihadi groups such as the Islamic State. As a consequence, these non-state violent groups are literally on the run.

In its less violent form, we contend, political Islam is also more vulnerable now than at any time since the 1970s. Egypt's short-lived Islamist experiment is now a footnote in that country's collective memory and with the Muslim Brotherhood outlawed Islamists have to face the tough choices of going underground, into exile, or to take up arms against the state. The Brotherhood's crisis extents to Jordan where the organisation was dissolved and declared "decadent" by the Jordanian Court of Cassation in July 2020.[11] The decision, which was followed by an arrest campaign of Brotherhood's members, might prompt the Islamic Action Front, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, to severe their peaceful political activities, notably staying clear of such set political pieces as general elections. In Tunisia, following its relative failure as the ruling party after the revolution, al-Nahda has moved away from efforts to Islamise Tunisia's society, law and conventions, and started pursuing consensus politics. This strategy has set the al-Nahda Party apart from its peers elsewhere in the region, and developments in Tunisia could arguably come to affect Islamist activism in a constructive way elsewhere in the Arab region. The same applies to Sudan, where the failures of Islam in power has isolated Islamist voices in the country's transition. They are no longer seen as acceptable, or even credible, political players following the end of the Bashir era.

Looking further afield, at non-Arab states, Iran is arguably only 'Islamic' thanks to the force of its clerics and the entrenchment of a socioeconomically and ideologically integrated entrenched elite in power. But in Iran like in the rest of the region, "No one has yet shown that the modern Islamist creed is an ideology suited to governing".[12] Only in Turkey does political Islam maintain a degree of public support, but even here the sultanistic behaviour of the Justice and Development Party president is not only eroding the legitimacy of the Islamist party as a credible force for government and justice, but Turkey's regional policies and wider international exchanges are raising questions at home and abroad about the current Turkish government's interests in regional peace and security and its commitments to the

republic's secular constitution and its non-religion-based political culture.

The Legacy of the IS and the Uncertain Future of Political Islam in the MENA Region

While the IS has been militarily defeated in Iraq and Syria, the chaos that still prevails in several countries, such as Yemen and Libya, and the imminent return of thousands of jihadi foreign fighters to their countries will pose an unprecedented challenge to the Arab MENA states. While IS represented one of the greatest regional immediate threats, the fight between violent Islamist groups and the state saw the balance of power eventually tipping in favour of the established order. Nonetheless, the sustained lack of regional cooperation, the partial failure to address the causes of violent revisionist movements, and the suspicious resilience of the states and regional system to change – as exemplified by Arab governments' tenacious hold on territory and power after the Arab uprisings – are all indicators that the fight might not yet be over. Moreover, the place of Islamism as the epicentre of modern contestations to the power and legitimacy of Arab states raises the question of the future of non-violent Islamism both as a political force and as a social reality.

The IS did not succeed in imposing its socio-political programme as a sustainable alternative to the existing governing systems in the MENA region. The group also failed to win the hearts and minds of the people and other jihadi groups, although it impacted the memories of many. Yet to conclude that the IS lost the war and therefore itself would be short-sighted, to say the least. While some point to its transformation into a clandestine global network or an insurgency and to the group's presence in the Iraqi and Syrian peripheries, others emphasise its reserves and its efforts to recover its forces in both countries. Moreover, one might argue that in the last analysis the group was successful and did achieve its main strategic objective of creating momentum for Salafi-jihadi rule in the Arab region. One could claim that the short-lived caliphate served a number of purposes. First, the IS trained and educated, both militarily and ideologically, a new and young generation of soldiers. Furthermore, the group's exceptionalism is that it democratised jihad and created a 'jihadi diaspora', if you will, where anybody could now launch a violent act in the name of the

caliphate – no matter who he or she is, where he or she lives, and without demonstrating strong links to Salafi-jihadi ideology. Hence, the end of the caliphate does not necessarily mean the end of jihad in the name of the caliphate, and the latter's shadow over militant Islam is likely to remain for years to come. Second, the IS created a precedent for the establishment of a pure Sunni 'Islamic state'. This will allow the group and its successor versions to play one of its favourite rhetorical tricks to the return to a 'golden age'. In the context of Salafi- jihadism, the IS has built history if nothing else. In short, the IS succeeded in planting new memories of 'Islamic' government, of populations living under a new caliphate, and of an example of Sharia rule for others to follow around the world.

Whether it is expressed through violent or peaceful means, political Islam is changing, evolving, splintering, and also repositioning itself. As we look forward, we see much greater diversity in the Islamists' message(s) and objectives and a realisation at some levels that the slogan 'Islam is the solution' may well have had its day, and in this, the narrative of Islamism will need to change and the movement will need to adapt to new realities. Irrespective of the apparently fixed nature of authoritarianism as the enduring model of governance in the MENA region, Islamists will need to reflect on the changing dynamics of the region since 2010 and with that develop the intellectual software and political hardware for trying to remain relevant in a region and its peoples, which appear to be much less fixated on Islam as a political alternative and much more focused on strategies for survival.

The MENA remains a region in flux and the fusion of politics and religion are such that without fixing the shortcomings of one, we will not be able to address the excesses of violence conducted in the name of the other.

Notes

[1] This essay draws on our major study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) entitled, *Islam, IS, and the Fragmented State: The Challenges of Political Islam in the MENA Region* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

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