

Failed or just fragile? Four myths about states and sovereignty in the Middle East

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Kurdish Peshmerga troops patrol the Iraqi city of Sinjar after its recapture from IS, November 2015. Image credit: NurPhoto via Getty.

To many observers the Middle East state system since the Arab uprisings stands at a critical juncture. The counter-revolutionary backlash from tenacious regimes bent on survival is still being felt through conflict in Syria, while war in Yemen and Iraq also continues to rage. Throughout recent history the region has witnessed regime changes alongside intense levels of popular mobilization, violence and transnational activism. The results have been highly destabilizing, resulting in challenges not only to regimes, but to the very sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. In a recent article for *International Affairs* I examine the many myths projected onto the Middle East by external observers, regarding the presumed faultlines that run through Arab nation-states.

What follows is my response to four of the most prevalent of these myths.

Myth 1: The fragility of artificial borders

When discussing the issue of borders in the Middle East we cannot escape the infamous Sykes — Picot Agreement of 1916, when two British and French officials sketched out a future Middle East map. Even though Sykes — Picot was not the agreement that created the borders we see today, it has become an obligatory point of reference in discussing states, sovereignty and their associated problems in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Never more so than since 2011, following the Arab uprisings, when the artificiality of states and borders and their possible remaking became a hot topic — one for politicians, academics and media pundits alike. Googling the catch phrase ‘the end of Sykes — Picot’, particularly after it was taken up as a slogan by ISIS, revealed around 300–400,000 hits at its peak. Predicting the end of the Arab state system became a popular pastime.

However, for all the talk of artificial borders, and accompanying discussion of state fragility and state breakdown, the system has mostly survived — so far. In fact, the much maligned system of states, borders and the regimes they enclose, with the possible exception of the Israel — Palestine question, has proved far more durable than many predicted.

So, rather than the ‘end of the Arab state’, the ‘end of Iraq and Syria’ or warnings of Balkanisation, we appear rather to be witnessing a successful counter-revolutionary movement; one in which states, borders and even regimes look set to survive. That

survival is aided and abetted by powerful insiders and outsiders alike. Few observers want to see fundamental changes to the map. The Arab state is here to stay.

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Myth 2: 'Failed states'

Alongside the Sykes — Picot myth has developed the 'failed state' myth. State failure trips off the tongue too easily and nowhere more so than in regions like MENA and Africa. It's a convenient label for would-be interveners who feel it their duty to 'fix' failed states. Yet let's pause for a moment: scholars who study state fragility and failure remind us that total state failure is rare and states have a tendency to right themselves. Indeed, this evidence of state survival supports the default position of realism in International Relations and is one we have often seen in practice. Looking around the region today, amid evidently weak states, we actually see a great deal of strong states. This is a region of 'rising' powers, as in other parts of the world, where economically rich and politically powerful states exert influence in and beyond the region. Yes, some states are struggling, but many are coping quite well and do not appear to be in danger of failing; nor do their borders appear threatened. Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt and Morocco, to name a few are all rather robust, and are engaged in classic competition over the regional power balance.

Myth 3: No room for democracy in the Middle East

For a long time, particularly after the Cold War, the idea that the Middle East was not the natural home to democratic practice has been a powerful one. The rest of the world did democracy; MENA (mostly) didn't. Rather, the late 20th century revealed a cluster of deeply embedded authoritarians, for reasons explored at length by political scientists. However the myth of non-democracy, always a flimsy one if you explore the longer history of liberalism and constitutionalism in the wider region, was busted by the Arab uprisings — not necessarily episodes in quick fix democracy, as we now know, but undoubtedly in popular movements demanding significant changes. These movements

may have subsided, but the desire for wide-reaching changes, expressed in ‘people power’ has not. We have not seen the end of demands for reform; in this regard at least the revolutions are unfinished.

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Myth 4: Religion is the governing force

Another myth is that of extreme religiosity as a governing force. Islamic ideologies in particular are often portrayed as subnational and transnational forces cutting away at the pull of states, and of sovereign authority in a conventional sense. Yet a close look at the region and the pressures informing state behaviour reveal as much about the regime security and the regional and international balance of power as they do about religious exceptionalism. And here scholars point out the instrumental use made of sectarianism and transnational ideologies, by regional regimes and outside powers alike, to alternatively reinforce or undermine competing political movements to suit their particular interests.

The instrumentalization of sectarianism is displayed to good effect in the war in Yemen as well as in Syria. But it is still states that ultimately call the tune. In other words, what motivates Middle East states and their behaviour appears to have more to do with the drive for power, security and building local and international alliances, than about profoundly held beliefs. So let's beware of essentializing the region on religious grounds or suggesting that transnational identities trump statist ones. Even amid the brutality and fragmentation of civil war, Iraqis and Syrians still identify themselves as Iraqis and Syrians.

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So amid the powerful myths about artificial borders, failed states, challenges to traditional concepts of sovereignty and statehood we find a rather familiar picture — at

least one that is familiar to scholars and policy-makers: a world of states, competition for power and influence and a preference for a maintenance of the status quo. Contestation: yes; bloody borders: yes; competing sites of authority: yes; but also a pattern of resilience, of status quo-ism, of non-exceptionalism.

The adjustment we need to make is to accept that states, borders and sovereignty are often messy and contested affairs. Where in the world is statehood perfectly performed? Where is sovereignty perfectly expressed? How are their parameters defined and by whom? We should not be overturning the relevance of such concepts for a region like MENA, or reimagining MENA outside a system of states. Rather, we should be thinking a little outside the box, beyond western tropes of sovereignty and statehood, about what the experience of Arab and non-Arab states tells us about the different patterns and pathways of states and the practices of sovereignty.

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She is one of three guest-editors of our special issue, 'Contentious borders: the Middle East and North Africa post-2011', published in July 2017.

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Fawcett's article in the issue is titled 'States and sovereignty in the Middle East: myths and realities'.

Read her article here.

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