Introduction

Six years after people took to the streets in protest at the nature of political organisation across the Middle East, efforts to shape the future of the region continue. Amidst the fragmentation of states, individuals retreated into local identities in an attempt to find security and meet basic needs, placing extra pressure on the state to maintain its position as the locus of power. When coupled with the challenges posed by the ethno-religious organisation of the Middle East, the regional state system that emerged in the aftermath of the Sykes-Picot negotiations[1] began to fragment. Across the Middle East, myriad identities operate across national, tribal, ethnic, sectarian, religious, gender, class and age groupings and to reduce such movements to homogenous opposition movements is infelicitous. Despite this, the existing literature on the Arab Uprisings has focussed predominantly upon the fragmentation of states and the structural factors that have fed into the protest movements, leaving implicit – or worse, ignoring – questions of agency and identity politics that should feature prominently in the analysis. Frustration at the denial of basic needs challenged the survival of the state and led to the empowerment of agency that largely remains underexplored.

As Ibn Khaldun notes in *The Muqaddimah,* "politics is concerned with the administration of home or city in accordance with ethical and philosophical requirements, for the purpose of directing the mass toward a behaviour that will result in the preservation and permanence of the (human) species". [2] Across the history of the Middle East and attempts to avoid political instability, structural factors have long restricted the possibility of agency to shape the nature of political organisation. It is clear that for Khaldun, politics is fundamentally about people and that both structure and agency must play a prominent role in political activity, yet all too often, the latter is omitted from analysis. The organisation of different forms of authority has marginalisted agency across the region, largely in an attempt to retain power. In order to understand these events, it is important to explore the structural factors that have shaped the nature of states and political conditions across the Middle East and from this, to explore agency.

This article contributes to these debates by applying the work of Giorgio Agamben[3] to the post Arab Uprisings Middle East, to understand the relationship between rulers and ruled and the fragmentation of the sovereign state. In this paper I argue that to understand changing regime-society relations and the ensuing fragmentation of a number of states in the Middle East, we must

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[1] See: Fromkin, *Peace to End*
[2] Khaldoun, *The Muqaddimah* 39.
[3] Agamben, *Homo Sacer.*

consider structures that have marginalised agency and then bring agency back into the analysis. I begin by outlining sovereignty in the Middle East before offering a brief genealogy of the concept of sovereignty and the state building project in the region. I then discuss authority and territoriality before arguing that exploring the relationship between rulers and ruled facilitated by the concept of *bare life* helps us to reintroduce agency and its impact upon political and security dynamics of the Middle East.

Sovereignty and Bare Life

The 1648 Peace of Westphalia is often taken to mark the birth of the modern sovereign state, based upon the premise of states possessing exclusive authority within their territorial borders and the principle of non-interference.[4] For Stephen Krasner, building upon a legacy of Weberian thought,[5] there are three elements to conventional understandings of sovereignty: international legal sovereignty, Westphalian sovereignty and domestic sovereignty,[6] taken to operate in conjunction with each other. Others such as James Caporaso stress that the interaction of authority, territoriality and citizenship is necessary for states to possess sovereignty.[7] The idea of territoriality is contested yet essential as it bring together space and authority, defining the borders within which political life can occur.

To argue that social, economic and political life occurs solely within the state defined as a fixed unit of space is problematic,[8] especially when the concept is complicated by religion, ideology and tribalism. Alternative methods of engaging with sovereignty and relations between rulers and ruled have been provided by Michel Foucault, Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, who are concerned with the ability to organise and control life. For Foucault, sovereignty should be understood as "the right to *take* life or *let* live"[9] while for Schmitt, sovereignty is understood in terms of power that is able to determine the suspension of the law, when 'a state of exception' can be declared.[10]

Agamben's work on sovereignty is grounded in biopolitics, concerned with the organisation and control of human life, and targeted by the governance power of the state. Agamben's discussion of sovereignty begins with a discussion of Schmidt's ideas of the state of exception, which are

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[4] Krasner, *Compromising Westphalia.*
[5] Weber, *Social and Economic Organization.*
[6] Krasner, *Sharing Sovereignty*, 87.
[7] Caporaso, *Changes in the Westphalian Order.*
[8] Agnew, *The Territorial Trap,* 77.
[9] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge,* 136.
[10] Ibid. and Schmitt, *Political Theology.*

important when considering the emergence of bare life. For Agamben, "the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule".[11] Ultimately, in the declaration of a state of emergency, the rendering of people as vulnerable and controlling life and death means that bare life is returned to the forefront of politics, regardless of the character of the political system.

As Agamben argues,

> the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe,* right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested.[12]

Thus, the sovereign differentiates between the realms of *bios* and *zoe*, creating a binary distinction between those recognised as fully human through their participation in political life and those who are outside, as political life and meaning is stripped from them, in *bare life*. Here, we must remember the biopolitical dimension of Agamben's sovereignty, which seeks to regulate life, rather than being based upon exclusion. *Homo Sacer* engages with questions about the relationship between rulers and ruled, with the title referring to an individual from ancient Rome who may be killed with impunity as long as this is outside of a religious ritual because their life is worthless.[13] The marginalisation of people into the condition of bare life can occur as a consequence of a number of different contexts and processes, yet in attempting to escape these conditions, violent dislocations can occur between regimes and society, as witnessed in the Arab uprisings.

In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben builds upon these ideas, arguing that "*the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government […] it is not the law, but the police-that is to say, the governmental machine that they form and support"*[14] [italics in original]. This ultimately suggests that politics is comprised of the constituent parts of government, structures both *formal* and *informal*, which build the mechanisms of the state. Identifying and engaging with these structures is then imperative when considering political change and its processes.[15] This distinction between government machinery and those constrained by it provides an opportunity to differentiate between rulers and ruled, between regimes and society and it is here where we can

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[11] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 18.
[12] Ibid, 9.
[13] Ibid, 72.
[14] Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory* 276.
[15] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies.*

build upon Agamben's work to allow for greater discussion of those regulated. Building upon this, in constructing the relationship between sovereign rule and biopolitical exception, Agamben argues that the camp – *with displaced meaning* - is the "hidden matrix of politics"[16] and as such, captures all of political life. Such a conclusion has severe ramifications for political action, with the camp transcending the concentration camp of the Nazi rule to include anything that can delimit a space where normal order is suspended, meaning that each one of us can be *homines sacri.*

The increasing prominence of Agamben within International Relations has stimulated a vibrant debate over the application of his ideas to the contemporary world.[17] One of the main points of tension in Agamben's work is concerned with his understanding of biopolitics, which builds upon Foucault's engagement with the term, seeking to 'correct' a number of factors, notably the idea that the rise of biopower heralded the emergence of modernity.[18] Instead, Agamben argues that politics is always biopolitics, as the political is shaped by the state of exception and its production of bare life. Another point of contention concerns the lack of development of this monolithic construction of bare life,[19] which can differ depending upon context and conditions. Nor does Agamben differentiate between liberal democratic regimes and totalitarian regimes; rather, he suggests that it is the division between bios and zoe that is the most important characteristic of political life.[20] Such ambiguity allows us to apply these ideas across a region that has a range of different political systems.

Perhaps the most damning criticism of Agamben's work, however, concerns the role of agency and its action against structural conditions.[21] It is clear that structural factors, both formal and informal, are central to our discussion of sovereignty; moreover, that agency operates within the confines of structural parameters. Yet Agamben's approach is guilty of restricting agency, removing socio-economic contexts that are essential for understanding the relativity of different situations. Even within restrictive conditions, individuals have the capacity to exercise agency, no matter how remote the possibility; as Dan Bousfield articulates, even the refugee can exercise agency.[22]

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[16] Agamben, *Mittel ohne Zweck,* 48.

[17] See: Closs Stephens and Vaughan-Williams, *Politics of Response*, Pin-Fat, Edkins and Shapiro, *Sovereign Lives* 2004, Prozorov, *Three Theses on 'Governance'.*

[18] For purposes of brevity, the debate about the validity of Agamben's claims will be left to other scholars. For an introduction, see Owens, *Reclaiming 'Bare Life'?*

[19] Levy, *Refugees, Europe.*

[20] Lemke, *A Zone of Indistinction*, 8.

[21] Walters *Acts of Demonstration*.

[22] Bousfield, *The Logic of Sovereignty.*

Agamben responds to this criticism by suggesting that agency is re-asserted by taking ownership of the condition, as "putting life into play".[23] To claim ownership, one has to accept the conditions of 'being thus' and to acknowledge the conditions within which one exists. Even this lacks methodological development, failing to adequately explore the impact of agency upon structures, as agency also operates prior to being and both prior to and post restructuring. Returning agency to the discussion allows for a greater analysis of political change and considering the structural change within society, both formally and informally.

Agamben speaks of the destruction of identities (and agency) through desubjectivation, the gradual destruction of identities, and resubjectivation, the reshaping of destroyed identities. If individuals exercise agency then this is a resubjectivation of the self. In Agamben's work, sovereignty is fully constituted as the only conceptual space within which the logic of sovereignty is sound but this concept merges potentiality and being, where potentiality can only be viewed retroactively.[24] Slavoj Žižek's response to this is to suggest that there must be an act prior to being, "overlooking the fact that the order of being is never simply given, but is itself grounded in some preceding Act".[25] By accepting Žižek's point, we take sovereignty as a process that is on-going in order to maintain logical consistency and by focussing upon the act, we are able to return agency to our project. In *The Use of Bodies,* Agamben engages with ontology and potentiality and in doing so, suggests that sovereignty should be a process, an act that repeats itself, which supports both the need to do this and the scope for us to do so.

In spite of these problems, Agamben's approach provides valuable scope to engage with contemporary events across the Middle East. It allows for the identification of structural conditions helps to understand the influences upon agency and their actions. As Raymond Hinnebusch suggests, a structural analysis allows us to identify both the *origins* and *roots* of instability.[26] Hinnebusch's approach goes a step further, arguing that this type of approach can engage with questions about the foreign policies of Middle Eastern states, although this is for another time and another place. Let us then turn to the Middle East and begin our project by first outlining the structural factors that have resulted in political life being stripped from people across the Middle East, before considering the need to return agency to our project.

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[23] Agamben, *Profanations.*
[24] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 45.
[25] Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 238.
[26] Hinnebusch, *Middle East in World Hierarchy,* 240.

The Formation of States

Structures do not emerge from a vacuum; they are shaped and determined by the world that surrounds them. Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, colonial activity has shaped regional politics, as Israel, Iraq, (Trans) Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Sates and Syria all experienced a colonial influence in their formation, best seen in legacy of Sykes–Picot agreement.[27] Following this, several states were created by the colonial powers whilst sectarian identities were manipulated across these new forms of political organisation in an effort to maintain control and influence.[28] Efforts to ensure regime survival in the nascent phases of state-building would have long-term consequences through the construction of structural violence and latent grievances that would manifest with the fragmentation of political organisation.

Within several states are a range of challenges to the centralised ruler, including from religious actors and tribal leaders. In turn, this has resulted in a diffusion of power from the core, resulting in an increase in the power of actors on the periphery and increased instability. A second serious problem is a lack of territorial clarity, which, in part, stems from the creation of the regional state system. These borders have often resulted in the separation of 'tribal', ethnic and religious groups across the region, which ultimately poses problems for regime calculations of both internal and external security.

In response to these challenges, rulers have imposed structures to secure their rule whilst also cultivating narratives – serving as normative structures – to increase legitimacy for internal and external audiences. Several states have referred to pan-state ideologies – Arabism and Islamism – in an effort to unite peoples across the region, which has often occurred out of national interest. Both these strategies involve referring to ideologies that transcend state borders and thus challenge the relevance of the Middle Eastern state system. Referring to leadership of the *umma*[29] has led some to suggest that states have no real power and that true authority – sovereignty – can only be found in God.

Competition between regime and religious authority is also found within Judaism, where tensions between the State of Israel and numerous Zionist organisations has manifested in the building of

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[27] Barr, *A Line in the Sand*. It is pertinent to note that the Sykes-Picot agreement was never implemented, yet the discussions fed into the San Remo agreement, but also serves as a mechanism of demonstrating the colonial legacy in the region.
[28] Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.
[29] Taken to be the world-wide community of Muslims.

illegal settlements outposts in the West Bank. Organisations such a Gush Emunim and the Hilltop Youth have conducted attacks against the state and Palestinians while also failing to recognise the legitimacy of the state of Israel, in a number of cases, seeking to bring about its downfall. Latest estimates suggest that over 500,000 people live in settlements in the West Bank,[30] with a growing number living in Area B, in breach of the Oslo Accords.[31] Of course, questions about territorial limits of political organisation play an increasingly important role in the nature of state sovereignty and the relationship between regimes and people.

What should not be forgotten is the extent to which the region has been and continues to be penetrated by external powers in a range of ways.[32] From the Sykes-Picot agreement until present day military activity in Syria, external powers have played a prominent role in shaping the nature of regional politics and the daily life of individuals, with tensions emerging between states and economic forces driven by the core.[33] Whilst a great deal of attention is placed upon security factors, it should also be remembered that such penetration has an impact economically.[34] Such economic penetration occurs through states but also through private companies and individuals, who continue to reproduce economic, political and legal structures that feed into the (re)construction of the sovereign state. Whilst the discovery of oil was heralded to facilitate autonomy and strength across the region, the patron-client relationships that emerged contributed to economic structures that fed into dependency across the region.[35] Of course, over time these relationships have changed,[36] but patron-client relations continue to penetrate – and shape – the region.

Territoriality

While politics is inherently about people, space is the theatre within which interactions that shape politics take place. These interactions exist within one another and co-exist within power relations and social practices; territoriality is the concept of political organisation within space. For political organisation to be territorial, organisations have to be coterminous with spatial borders, which

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[30] B'Tselem, an Israeli Human Rights organization, puts this number at 547,000 people living in 125 government sanctioned settlements in the West Bank and a further 100 settlement outposts. See: B'tselem, *Statistics on Settlements and Settler Population.*

[31] The designation of areas A, B and C was an attempt to facilitate the Israeli military withdrawal from the West Bank and the transfer to the Palestinian Authority as part of the peace process. According to Dror Etkes, an anti-settlement activist, 'the takeover of land in Area B is a combination of unbridled thievery by settlers and impotence on the part of the Israeli authorities". See: Eldar, *West Bank Outposts*

[32] Brown, *International Politics.*

[33] Halliday, *Politics of Differential Integration*

[34] See: Hinnebusch, *Middle East in World Hierarchy,* 232

[35] See: Alnasarwi, *Nationalism, Oil*, and Bromley, *Hegemony and World Oil.*

[36] See:

determine where political organisations (do not) operate; sovereignty is then exclusionary violent. To reach this point, it is necessary to define – and secure - a people, or citizenry. As Benedict Anderson argues, national identity is a constructed identity, reproduced through a range of means to cultivate shared memories.[37] Amidst demographic change and population growth, maintaining links across all members is impossible yet the development of technologies to appeal to a mass audience helps to circumvent these challenges.

People operate and exist within particular areas, which are governed by particular systems of governance. While some have suggested that the term territoriality suffices, as it deals with political organisation within a bounded territory, the concept of governmentality provides a greater analytic clarity. Governmentality is primarily concerned with how human conduct is directed and regulated, within and beyond state institutions, between *men and things*,[38] by which Mick Dillon means the interaction of actors and nature of those interactions.[39] From this, governmentality is a structural procedure, yet it is largely designed to reflect these issues on the ground and, as such, is inherently shaped by agency.[40] From this, the power of the state is dispersed and distributed through state agencies, although it must be seen and performed for this to occur. Governmentality must occur within a clearly defined territory, which is different to an empire or tribes, who exercise authority over people not territory.

The process of state-building attempts to establish systems of governmentality and territoriality to circumvent challenges to regime stability and security, and while governmentality draws upon agency to find traction within the norms and cultures of a society, agency is simultaneously marginalised and utilised. To understand territoriality and governmentality, we must engage with the concept of authority and with it, the norms and social structures that are prevalent across the region. Locating agency within this, be it through a consideration of a citizen or something excluded, helps not only to shape structures but also to understand political action.

Authority and Autonomy

While often intertwined, authority and autonomy are at the heart of discussions of sovereignty. Authority can be applied to various individuals and groups, ranging from family hierarchies, tribal

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[37] It is worth noting that this is perhaps more of an ideal than a reality. See: Anderson, *Imagined Communities,*
[38] Foucault, *Governmentality*
[39] Dillon, *Sovereignty and Governmentality*, 329
[40] Governmentality need not connote a negative power; rather, it is a productive and formative dimension of power.

leaders, religious officials, regional officers, employers to rulers but when applied to the sovereign state, it is assumed that these forms of authority have coalesced into a hierarchical structure within a particular territory. Across the Middle East, however, regime authority – and autonomy - are often challenged by actors operating both at a sub-state and supra-state level. At a sub-state level, the melange of identities poses a challenge to demographic coherence, from ethnicity, tribalism or religious difference. This has an impact upon societal security,[41] where identity groups operating within a particular area are securitised[42] against an 'other'.

This increasing securitisation results in groups retreating within other aspects of their identities, which often offer a form of authority. The ethno-religious construction of the region means that political instability all too often emerges from ethnic or religious challenges, with the potential for regional consequences, such as in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and Palestine. A further challenge can be found in states with strong tribal societies, what Joel Migdal has referred to as "strong societies and weak states".[43] Weak states are those who are unable to enforce governance structures, to "*penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways".[44] It should be noted that structures that regulate authority can be both formal and informal – included but not limited to political, legal, economic, normative and religious – stemming from a range of sources.

Tribal kinship plays a crucial role when understanding sources of authority[45] and the work of Khaldun is again helpful when understanding its importance. Elucidating on the importance of ties within the communities, Khaldun places particular emphasis on the importance of *asabiyya* for collective security,[46] which "strengthens [a group's] stamina and makes them feared, since everybody's affection for his family and group is more important" than for others.[47] Such an extension can be applied to the building of collective identities, although tensions can emerge when state formation clashes with tribal loyalties.

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[41] Buzan, *Societal security, state security.*
[42] The process of securitization has been discussed at length elsewhere (see: Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, *Security,* Balzacq, *Faces of Securitization,* McDonald, *Securitization and Construction*) I build upon this approach to explore how particular identities are framed as existential threats by regimes as an attempt to maintain security and stability.
[43] Migdal, *Strong Societies Weak States.*
[44] Ibid, 4.
[45] Particularly those on the Arabian Peninsula, but also within Iraq and Iran.
[46] Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, 64.
[47] Khaldoun, *The Muqaddimah,* 263.

The action of Da'ish in the summer of 2014 helps us to reflect on this. Understanding the importance of tribal authority, Da'ish quickly sought to secure the support of tribal leaders and the first issue of *Dabiq* documented the "extensive history of building relations with the tribes".[48] Senior Da'ish figures also met with tribal elders and dignitaries, cultivating pledges of allegiance and *bayaa.* The group stressed the importance of tribal norms and customs, while also returning rights and property to their 'rightful' owners and ensuring security and stability. Da'ish has also grounded its governmentality within tribal norms and customs, becoming aware that ensuring stability and security in areas under its control – within the context of structures already known to people living there – was essential to maintaining control of the territory.

Such strategies within state-building projects are not new. Ibn Saud used a variety of strategies in order to unite disparate groups with differing claims of authority across the peninsula, including the use of force, the continued alliance with the Wahhabist movement, and processes of inter-tribal marriage.[49] Despite initial successes, the state-building process within Saudi Arabia continues, with the Al Saud employing detribalisation strategies in an attempt to create a hierarchy of authority with their ruling family at the top.[50] Other states have not been as successful in resolving tribal tensions.[51] As Clive Jones pertinently notes, Yemen is subject to a range of serious challenges, notably "endemic tribalism", sectarianism, a rebellion in the north with a growing secessionist movement in the south, a strong Al Qa'ida franchise and Da'ish all exerting centrifugal pressures on state authority.[52]

Regime authority can also be challenged by supra-state ideologies, the most prominent of which were pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism. While ultimately both movements failed due to the renaissance of nationalist agendas, the legacy of these pan-'isms' demonstrates the existence of competing sources of authority. The pan-Arab movement with Gamal Abdl Nasser at its vanguard suggested that the Arab states were subservient to a larger collective, to *umma arabiyya wahida dhat risala khalida*, the 'one Arab nation with an immortal mission'.[53] This vision eviscerated states and societies and eroded their agency, claiming to speak for the 'Arab Street', leaving the nation-state in its wake. Rulers aware of the power of this narrative would tap into a source of legitimacy that transcended domestic reserves, despite its threat to the survival of the sovereign state and used

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[48] Dabiq, *The Return of Khalifah,* 12.
[49] See: Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom,* 68. Nevo, *Religion and national identity*, Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia,* Commins,. *The Wahhabi Mission* and Kostiner, *The Making of Saudi Arabia*
[50] Mabon, *Kingdom in Crisis.*
[51] For instance see: Boucek and Ottoway, *Yemen on the Brink*.
[52] Jones, *The Tribes that Bind*, 902.
[53] Ajami, '*The End of Pan-Arabism'.*

its symbolic power in an effort to engender popular support.[54] The birth of pan-Islamism stemmed from a desire to challenge the pan-Arab discourse and Saudi Arabia's attempt to counter the rising power of Nasser's Egypt by stressing the importance of Islamic unity.[55] A pure pan-Islamist vision also held Middle East states to be transient entities, working towards the unification of the Muslim world, yet the ideology was increasingly used for political ends. Ultimately, both ideological movements were brought down by the enduring power of the nation state.[56]

Both pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism appealed to a sense of *asabiyya* amongst the people of the region. Their instrumentalised use can also cause tensions as regimes realise the power of these identities. For instance, in post revolutionary Egypt, President Al Sisi sought to restrict the power of the pan-Islamic narrative by restricting the space of the Muslim Brotherhood – and other civil society actors – in a move that was quickly followed by Jordan. Of course, to speak of terms such as Pan Arabism, Pan Islamism and the 'Arab Street' is to homogenise peoples under a broad banner term, once more resulting in the denial of agency. To engage more with the interaction of people within these ideologies, a deeper analysis of the agents involved within these identities along with the cleavages within such movements is required.

In response to these challenges, regimes have implemented structures that seek to restrict the possibility of agency, while holding together the fabric of political organisation. State-building processes seek to circumvent these challenges and establish a framework ensuring regime security and stability whilst the existence of structures to circumvent challenges results in a range of different structural pressures across states. The onset of the Arab Uprisings meant that long-standing grievances across the region would erupt in political unrest. The manifestation of latent political structures in violence would not be a new feature of Middle Eastern politics but the increasing challenges to state authority would present new opportunities to respond to threats in different ways.

In addition to the centrifugal pressures on regimes and competing sources of authority, a number of regimes used the perception of competing sources of authority as a means of retaining control. The Shi'a of the region have long been framed as a minority 5th column, seen to be doing the bidding of Iran and the post-uprisings climate allowed this threat to be exacerbated. Regimes sought to secure the support of domestic populations by framing opposition movements as groups that were doing

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[54] Barnett, *Dialogues.*
[55] Kramer, *Muslim congresses*, 309.
[56] See: Kramer, *Ivory Towers.*

the bidding of Tehran, ignoring a range of factors that would undermine such an argument. This would secure support from domestic groups while also locating the struggle within broader geopolitical tensions between the Sunni Arab Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia and Iran.

While this ensured the support of regional allies, it also deepened tensions with Iran and restricted political opposition across the archipelago. Concern at the "expansionist ambitions of the Persian Shia establishment", were also expressed in international media sources by the Bahraini Foreign Minister, who blamed Iran for unrest in Bahrain, Lebanon, Kuwait and Yemen.[57] Such concerns about Iranian involvement were also seen in Iraq, where Saudi officials urged the US not to "leave Iraq until its sovereignty has been resorted, otherwise it will be vulnerable to the Iranians".[58] The rising Iranian influence across Iraq and the perception of it elsewhere in the region would undermine regime efforts to maintain a monopoly on authority, leading to increased insecurity within and between states. Of course, the (perceived) involvement of external actors within a state also has serious implications for governmentality.

The Emergence of Bare Life

The interaction of these factors demonstrates how people can become marginalised and exist within bare life, re-introduced into politics through the onset of a state of exception. Within this context, political life was stripped from large numbers of people across the Middle East, where lives became expendable as government machinery attempted to retain control, both formally and informally. Such processes are on-going, as regimes seek to maintain power and people engage with the structures of politics. Following decades of exception and bare life, the Arab Uprisings were an outlet for much of the frustration people had with governance structures regulating the state, resulting in a struggle between regimes and societies and the (further) marginalisation of particular identities for domestic, regional and international audiences. Put another way, the state of exception begot the state of exception, whilst bare life begot bare life. As noted in *The Kingdom and The Glory,* to understand politics – and the Arab Uprisings – it is imperative to look at government and governance structures within a state that serve the biopolitical project. The need to do this is supported by the Arab Human Development Report 2016, which argues "the events of 2011 and their ramifications

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[57] Al Khalifa, *The Gulf States are Stuck*
[58] 06RIYADH9175_a, 2006 *SAUDI MOI*

are the outcome of public policies over many decades that gradually led to the exclusion of large sectors of the population from economic, political and social life".[59]

Amidst a range of challenges including the global financial crisis, a growing middle class[60] and huge demographic changes, notably a youth boom and a population increase of 53% between 1991 and 2010,[61] the authoritarian social contract began to fragment. Before the uprisings the middle class was largely stable, yet political marginalisation, coupled with the rising price of essentials - notably bread – would alter this stability. A Human Development Report that tracked change between 2009 and 2014 offers greater insight into change at this time, noting a positive change of +10 in Saudi Arabia, facilitated by the $96 billion package of social reform, and Syria, experiencing a negative change of -15.[62] Additionally, with the existence of states of exception across the region, perhaps best characterised by Egypt's *Emergency Laws*, people were marginalised by legal and political structures, with political life stripped from them. From this, in order to understand the uprisings we must identify both the conditions and the structures that facilitated the biopolitical project and ultimately, bare life.

The story of post-invasion Iraq demonstrates the impact of these changes. Post 2003 the political landscape underwent a rapid upheaval through the deba'athification process and the installation of a Shi'a led government in Baghdad. These structural changes, both political-legal and normative also shaped the nature of governmentality, with institutions also taking orders from organisations beyond the state. Moreover, the evisceration of state infrastructure in post-invasion Iraq left many Sunnis unemployed amidst chaos and increasing Shi'a militancy.[63] As the governments of Nouri al Maliki and Haider al Abadi pursued sectarian agendas, promoting Shi'a causes at the expense of Sunni and non-sectarian Iraqi causes, Sunni Iraqis became increasingly squeezed by the government, militias and Sunni militancy, leaving many fearing for their lives.

Ultimately, in an effort to ensure that basic needs were met, a number of Sunnis from Anbar Province turned to groups such as Da'ish in an effort to protect them from the government and the militias that were increasingly targeting Sunnis across the state.[64] Shi'a militias, freed from the shackles of decades of marginalization and discrimination under Saddam, coupled with the weakness of the government in Baghdad were able to commit acts of violence seemingly with impunity and,

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[59] United Nations, *Arab Human Development Report 2016*, 17.
[60] In Syrian this was 56.5%, in Egypt 55% and in Yemen 31.6%. See: United Nations, *Arab Middle Class*
[61] International Labour Organization, *Rethinking Economic Growth* p6
[62] Human Development Report, *Table 2.*
[63] Mabon and Royle, *The Origins of ISIS*
[64] Ibid.

often, with implicit support of the institutions of the state. Moreover, systems of governance designed to protect people became sites of contested authority, with the police at this time "controlled not by the MOI but by ISCI/Badr, particularly in Karbala, Diwaniyah, and Nasiriyah".[65] From this, men wearing police and army uniforms attacked Sunni individuals on the basis of their sectarian identity and such practices became routine across parts of Iraq with sectarian tensions.[66] This structural violence has resulted in discrimination, forced unemployment, violence and ultimately, bare life. With the prioritisation of particular groups, typically those that provide support to the regime and help to ensure its survival, be it along sectarian, ethnic, tribal – or even economic – lines, those identities have their political existence stripped from them and as such exist outside of the political system.

Bahrain provides another example of longstanding structural grievances resulting in unrest. In February 2011, decades of latent grievances regarding social and economic factors, political and legal questions, religion, and ethnicity, manifested in large-scale protests across the archipelago. Historically, Shi'a religious celebrations of Mahrram and Ashura provided an outlet for discontent, firmly associating the Shi'a with unrest in Bahrain.[67] Over time, in response to this unrest, the regime offered largely cosmetic reforms that were supported by measures aimed at restricting action.[68] In response to the 2011 uprisings, the Al Khalifa regime responded with force, creating a sectarian master narrative that further marginalised the Shi'a population, politically, legally and economically.[69] The master narrative also moved into the cultural and private realms, pervading all facets of public and private life.[70] Physical force – from Saudi led GCC troops and Sunni Asians in the riot police – was supplemented with allegations of Iranian involvement within the protests[71] and the continuation of structures to restrict action. Moreover, another strategy was to strip citizenship from prominent individuals complicit in the protests, as an additional attempt to regulate behaviour.[72]

As the uprisings continued across the region, revolution and counter-revolution vied for control, with structural factors resulting in increased marginalisation of people. In Egypt, the end of the Mubrak era resulted in a democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood regime under the leadership of

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[65] 08BAGHDAD239_a, 2008 *Street stronger than Parliament*.
[66] Mabon and Royle, *The Origins of ISIS.*
[67] See Holmes, *Working in the Revolution* and Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State*
[68] See Wehrey 2013
[69] Kasbarian and Mabon, *Contested Spaces.*
[70] Ibid.
[71] Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf.*
[72] Ibid and *To silence dissidents.*

Mohammad Morsi, which also stressed the need for emergency legislation to maintain security and stability.[73] The counter revolution that toppled Morsi, violently banned the group's supporters from political life in Egypt, imprisoning thousands of Muslim Brothers and their supporters, along with the massacre of over a thousand of the group's supporters on 14th August, 2013 in Cairo.[74]

The fragmentation of states and their structures would also result in conditions of bare life across the region. The Syrian civil war has resulted in almost 500,000 deaths and around 11 million displacements, 4 million externally and 7 million internally as a consequence of the struggle for political engagement and the ensuing stripping of political life from opponents of the regime. This places an undeniable burden upon neighbouring states, a number of whom are not signatories of refugee treaties and lack the domestic infrastructure to responsibly deal with the influx of millions of people. With a population of 4 million, Lebanon has taken in around 1.5 million refugees from Syria, raising the number of people who are living in extreme poverty in the state to almost 3 million.[75] Moreover, as a consequence of Lebanon not signing the 1951 Refugee Convention, Syrians in Lebanon have limited legal status and face a precarious life.

A large number of people across the region lack citizenship but remain subject to domestic legislation and governmentality. Given the conditions within which some of the non-citizens are working in often without protection from the institutions of the state, considering interactions between rulers and ruled must also include non-citizens. The implementation of the *kafala* system is perhaps the best indication of bare life in the Middle East, as a structure that limits the possibility of agency, restricting the movement of individuals to the extent that passports are often held by employers.[76] Regimes have manipulated and created structures to facilitate difference and to orchestrate loyalty whilst repressing the capacity of agency to act. This is largely embedded within governmentality, built upon a local context but the prominence of non-citizen populations across a number of states means that these structures and the norms upon which they are grounded require moulding.

Within the context of fragmenting sovereignty, which left states vulnerable to the political ambitions of others, regimes manipulated events to ensure their own survival. In this context, Islamic rhetoric was increasingly used as a cloak for geopolitical agendas, best seen through Iranian and Saudi Arabian efforts to increase the legitimacy and vitality of their own rule for internal and external

[73] Revkin, *Egypt's Untouchable President.*
[74] *Massacre in Rabaa.*
[75] *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan.*
[76] Khan, *End Khafala.*

audiences.[77] Schisms within the Muslim world would also serve as a means of undermining governmentality, authority and autonomy, as individuals faced often-contradictory guidance from competing sources of authority. Religious difference would lead to increasingly securitized divisions and also prove to be a useful tool in the effort to retain security after the Arab Uprisings.

Accusations of 5th column across the region, comprising fears of a Shi'a Crescent'[78] doing the bidding of Iran, once more denying the agency of local organisations and failing to appreciate that the stronger seat of Shi'a thought is within Najaf rather than in Qom. Iranian support for groups such as Hizballah and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain would increase tensions,[79] leading to the politicizing and securitizing of sectarian differences that have regional consequences to this day.[80] Reflecting concerns at Iranian influence, Saudi officials urged the US to "cut off the head of the snake"[81] and lamented the Iranian penetration of Iraq. Another cable suggested that Maliki was "an Iranian agent",[82] further adding to this climate of suspicion.

From these events, it becomes increasingly apparent that despite suffering marginalisation, discrimination and securitization – resulting in conditions of bare life across the region – it is imperative to bring agency back into the discussion. While focussing upon structure clarifies certain facets of political organisation, structure is grounded in - and indeed shaped by – agency and by giving greater credence to the role of agency within the context of the relationship between rulers and ruled, a greater awareness of political dynamics is facilitated. When considering the dynamics of Middle Eastern politics across the last 5 years, while a number of ideologies and movements have cut across the region, domestic political, social and economic conditions have resulted in protest, driven by agency. The rejection of structures has resulted in widespread violence and in the case of Syria, civil war.

Even within these cases, a sovereign resides, although their rule is often challenged by competing visions of authority. Such opposition is often framed within the context of an existential struggle and from it comes the state of exception. For many states, this transcends conflict and also exists within the context of a process of securitization, often along sectarian lines and thus, occurring across borders. Framing political tensions in such a way serves to remove agency from domestic groups while also consolidating the support base of a ruling elite and eroding the traction that socio-

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[77] Mabon, *Saudi and Iran.*
[78] A term coined by King Abdullah of Jordan.
[79] Alhasan, *The Role of Iran*
[80] See: Mabon, *Saudi and Iran*.
[81] 08RIYADH649_a.
[82] 09RIYADH447_a.

economic protest movements have been able to draw upon. Within this process, regimes are moving to create the conditions of bare life in an effort to both ensure their own survival while also securing regional alliances. The onset of the Uprisings suggests that it is not enough to focus solely upon structure; we must also consider the role of agency in political activity.

Bringing Agency Back

This approach only gets us so far, yet as far as it can take us, it helps us to identify the conditions within which agency should be reintroduced to the discussion. An Agambian approach helps to identify structural trends that are shaping the contemporary Middle East, but it is important to go further. To facilitate this within the context of sovereignty and the Arab Uprisings the need to bring agency back into the discussion is imperative, achieved by engagement with Margaret Archer's take on the structure-agency debate.[83] Archer's *Realist Social Theory* argues for the merits of a critical realist position, suggesting that structure and agency are autonomous and temporally separate with structure necessarily predating agency. In it,§ Archer offers a social theory with both strong explanatory power and methodological strength, best encapsulated by the morphogenetic cycle. Morphogenesis is the process of a thing "being shaped and reshaped by the interplay between their constituents, parts and persons",[84] with change occurring over 4 stages:

The argument runs as follows:

1. There are internal and necessary relations with and between social structures (SS);
2. Causal influences are exerted by social structure(s) (SS) on social interaction (SI);
3. There are causal relationships between groups and individuals at the level of social interaction (SI);
4. Social interaction (SI) elaborates upon the composition of social structure(s) (SS) by modifying current internal and necessary structural relationships and introducing new ones where morphogenesis is concerned. Alternatively, social interaction (SI) reproduces existing internal and necessary structural relations when morphostasis applies.

The morphogenetic cycle demonstrates a three stage process of change, beginning with structural conditioning (T1), examining social interaction (T2-3), culminating in structural morphogensis or morphostatis (T4). This cycle is continuous; thus T4 of one cycle is T1 of the next. The impact of agency (SI) can clearly be seen and ultimately, as Archer argues, to have real change it is imperative to consider how agency modifies internal and necessary structural relationships, introducing new ones when required. It is easy to see how this aids our project to understand political change by giving power to agency to facilitate change.

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[83] Archer, *Realist social theory* 168-169.

[84] Archer, *Morphogenetic Approach.*

As previously noted, Agamben fails to engage conceptually with the changing role of agency, beyond the acceptance of 'being thus'. To this end, the emergence of sovereignty as fully constituted needs conceptual development, to allow for the potentiality of agency to facilitate change, or indeed replicating the actuality. Within the context of political organisation in the Middle East, it is clear that agency has a prominent role to play in facilitating political change across a range of different ways. Archer's morphogenetic cycle provides a methodological approach to supplement Agamben's work on sovereignty, which, although incomplete and requires further discussion of epistemological and ontological factors, goes some way to reintroducing agency to these discussions. After all, as this article has attempted to show, despite the focus upon structural factors within discussions of sovereignty, structure is grounded within and predicated upon agency and to ignore it is remiss.

Conclusions

Conceptualising sovereignty in today's world is an increasingly problematic task and perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the Middle East. Identifying and interrogating the tensions implicit in the term help us to understand the fragmentation of regime-society tensions and ultimately, the onset of the Arab Uprisings. The establishment of structures to address the challenge of competing sources of authority has featured prominently in the state-building projects of many Middle Eastern states and, as a consequence, agency has been disregarded all too often. Sovereignty is exclusionary in increasingly violent ways yet the failure to acknowledge and allow scope for agency to operate within discussions of sovereignty makes us guilty of epistemic violence. From the pan-state ideologies of Arabism and Islamism, to the term 'Arab Street', agency is marginalized while simultaneously employed as a means of providing structural context.

When unpacking the term to explore its constituent parts, sovereignty typically includes an alignment of authority and territoriality but this can be challenged across the Middle East. Challenges that arise weaken structural conditions, restricting the capacity of agency to act and leading to the acknowledgement of 'being thus'. While the idea of sovereignty classically conceived may be in its embers in the Middle East, regimes do not appear ready to go out with a whimper; rather, it appears that regimes will do what it takes to ensure that power is retained, no matter the human cost.

Structural factors in the guise of governmentality are designed to control people within the territorial borders of their states and their (in)ability to do so reveals a great deal about the strength of the states. Sovereignty is inherently exclusionary and the need to define, redefine and maintain

the exception exposes the strength of the state. Of course, this does not mean that one should ignore the excluded and, in light of the fracturing of the regional order where millions have been displaced from homes internally and externally, those excluded are increasingly important. If the conceptualisation of a more agency driven approach to understanding sovereignty is successful then points of dissonance can be identified between structure and agency. From that, it is possible to identify trends across the region to better understand political developments and change. Ultimately, we must remember of Ibn Khaldoun's message, that politics is fundamentally about people and our concepts should remember this.

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