A State Is Born:
What Lies behind the Establishment of
the Islamic State

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The Islamic State, whose establishment was announced over a year ago by its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, started out as a quirky peculiarity, but has since turned into an influential element in the region as well as a challenge to the international community. The process of its establishment and expansion seems to have been facilitated by a convergence of four major trends: upheavals that led to the collapse of the region's Arab nation states and their decline into a state failure process; an ideological vacuum initiated by disillusionment with pan-Arabism and the stinging inability of the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam, particularly in Egypt, to fill that vacuum; the reluctance of the West to intervene in any substantive sense, combined with a lack of global leadership and an irrelevant US strategy;[1] and the unwillingness of moderate opposition groups in Syria to cooperate and formulate a joint vision. These trends unfolded while jihadist organizations were present and active in the region.[2]

From an historical perspective, one can view the Islamic State as a product of the region's chronic structural instability. Over the last century, the Middle East experienced four major upheavals, each of which led to the formation of a political structure at odds with the social framework that was based primarily on ethnic, tribal, or religious affiliations. This incompatibility inevitably eroded the legitimacy of the various regimes and heightened the potential for opposition and subversion. In most cases, the nation-state model survived, thanks to an authoritarian rule dependent on effective security and intelligence services.

The fragility of the political model was evident in the difficulty with which most of the regimes have withstood the shockwaves of Arab upheavals, the weakening of central governments, and the acceleration of statehood failures. Political Islam – the chief ideological rival of nationalism – failed the first test it faced (the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt). As it faded, it left behind an ideological vacuum that Salafist jihadist movements rapidly tried to fill. The conditions created by state failures throughout the region were exploited by radical Islamic currents, the most prominent being ISIS, which led to the establishment of the Islamic State.

This chapter surveys the sociopolitical features of the chronic structural instability of the region from an historical perspective. It examines the significance of the failed state and the recurrence of this phenomenon throughout the region. It also analyzes the connection between the expansion of the failed state phenomenon and the growing strength of ISIS and the establishment of the Islamic State.

Chronic Structural Instability from an Historical Perspective

Historically, the region was long organized along local, extended family, tribal, ethnic, and religious lines with a clear correlation between identity and territory.[3] Defined territories were home to distinct homogeneous ethnic, tribal, and religious groups. Most of these were backward societies (i.e., with low literacy rates and no modern infrastructure and industrialization). Any change in the traditional power structure was considered foreign, provocative, or rebellious and thus illegitimate; as such, it aroused opposition, which in some cases translated into counterrevolution. Subsequently, upheavals in the Arab region called into question the geopolitical logic that defined the modern region, which involved states with a central authoritarian government and well-defined borders drawn by the Sykes-Picot agreement. Since their inception, most of these nations have experienced instability that led to extreme political crises and threatened their survival – but survive they did, thanks to oppression and intimidation. Indeed, they maintained their political structure through regime changes until the shockwaves of the Arab Spring.

The first upheaval in the region came with the spread of the Ottoman Empire, which organized the area politically and administratively (*sanjaks*) in a way that was supposed to grant it efficient administrative control. Ottoman rule managed to institute moderate and long term processes of modernization without rousing serious antagonism, and was capable of putting down any

manifestation of such with a brutal hand. The Turkish sultans enjoyed a form of legitimacy due to their religious background, and in many respects the Ottoman Empire served as a kind of Islamic caliphate.

The second significant upheaval came with the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I and the division of the spoils among the victors – Great Britain and France – via the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916. As part of the agreement, the region was divided into areas of influence and artificial political state units. These units amassed together various ethnic groups, rival religions, and even speakers of different languages into single states with loose identities and no shared national or historical ethos. Borders were drawn to frame state entities that were modeled on nation states prevalent in Europe at the time.

The ouster of the monarch by the Free Officers Movement during the Egyptian revolt of 1952 followed by the Baath Revolutions in Syria and Iraq marked the third major upheaval. The Officers revolt introduced a political ideological alternative – pan-Arabism – that peaked with the establishment of the United Arab Republic led by former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. In Iraq, Syria, and Libya, despotic regimes became the norm, as these were successful in preserving the multi-ethnic, multi-tribal, and multi-religious entities by force and through the relentless oppression of their opponents. In these three cases, the rulers were members of a minority and nurtured members of "their own" sect as well as particular ethnic, religious, or tribal groups at the expense of everyone else. The power structure they created was corrupt, lacking any real public legitimacy.

Oppression, frustration, and changes in the international arena – particularly the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which was the strategic support of these rulers, and the growth of globalization, mass media, social media, and the impressive successes of al-Qaeda – paved the way for the fourth upheaval. The butterfly effect that began in late 2010 in a Tunisian marketplace became an all-encompassing regional upheaval that led to the collapse of several Arab nation states and an impressive, albeit short-lived surge of political Islam in the region. Concurrently, the area saw the meteoric rise of Salafi jihadist Islam. In the case of the Islamic State, this became manifest in the conquest of extensive territories in northwest Iraq and eastern Syria, the obliteration of established international borders, and the founding of an entity that – in the eyes of its leader and followers – was the basis of the great Islamic caliphate. More than any of its predecessors, this fourth upheaval

was attended by a deepening of the bitter Sunni-Shiite rift. The religious struggle now grew into a political conflict between Saudi Arabia, which saw itself as the leader of the Sunni world, and Iran, the leader of the Shiites.

The fourth upheaval has been a sharp reminder that the Arab nation states never succeeded in becoming political units with an adequate legitimacy base or institutionalized mechanisms to resolve conflicts and manage social change. With power structures that were never legitimate, they achieved stability – as became fully evident in Syria and Iraq – through force. The Arab Spring, the moment for those seeking change, steered these countries onto the path of state failure. The weakness of many Arab nation states, their rapid decline – in which central governments lost their authority and ability to govern – and particularly their monopoly on the use of force, created the conditions for the rise of other, non-state actors,[4] such as the Islamic State. These movements have exploited the absence of government while conquering territories and populations, appropriating state functions, and presenting alternate ideologies in order to reshape the region.

The Islamic State and the rising number of failed states are thus interconnected. The failed states are no longer mere local events or human tragedies limited to one state or one people at a time. As arenas of conflict, they have become a regional and international challenge due to the instability that they export.[5] With its decentralized network, the Islamic State too is no longer a local phenomenon limited to areas in Iraq and Syria. Present throughout the Middle East,[6] proxies are gradually and continuously formed and nurtured in East Asia, Western Europe, and North America as part of its effort to change the global order and challenge the West's fundamental values.

What is a Failed State, and How Did It Become an International Challenge?

A failed state[7] is defined or diagnosed as such by its non-existent or limited ability to provide its citizens with minimal personal security.[8] Weakened governance stems from blatant weakness in a central government and the loss of a state's monopoly on the use of force. "Governance" reflects how well state institutions function by virtue of the government's "stateness"[9] and the extent to which law enforcement and regulatory bodies can do their job in a way that allows the state to manage the economy, realize its sovereignty, and provide its citizens with adequate (domestic and external) security, law and order, and health and educational services.[10]

In failed states, ungoverned outlying areas expand and become arenas that allow and encourage activity by external actors, both state and non-state. The latter further destabilize the principle of "stateness," increase chaos, and help export violence and instability to the territory of the failed state. Non-state actors manage to seize control of locales and populations, and then undergo a process of institutionalization in order to improve their mechanisms of control over land and people. Such processes of institutionalization turn non-state actors into semi-state actors, for example, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.[11]

Countries suffering from internal fragmentation and weak or non-functional institutions are liable to become failed states. Michael Hudson has classified various nations on a continuum from fragile to stable to dynamic, with reference to these two variables. According to his conclusions, when effectivity is low and fragmentation high, a state's stability is threatened.[12]

	Low political-identity fragmentation	High political-identity fragmentation
High government effectivity	Dynamic: China, Turkey, Chile	Fragile but controlled: Saudi Arabia, Syria (the latter before 2011)
Low government effectivity	Stable but sluggish: Armenia, Bangladesh, Tanzania	Fragile and unstable: Nigeria, Somalia, Libya, Iraq, Syria (the latter 3 states after 2011)

Many nations around the world lie somewhere along the continuum of different degrees of state failure.[13] The uniqueness and degree of state failure in each case are a consequence of the connection between the seriousness of the threat and internal and external challenges on the one hand, and the performance level of state institutions, or "state quality,"[14] on the other. The lower the level of performance of a state's institution, and the lower the level of legitimacy that the public attributes to its institutions and the government in general, the greater the distress and impact of internal and external conflicts, and the higher the state's level of failure. The higher the state's level of failure, the greater the possibility of the spread and takeover of non-state and other – usually violent – entities that view themselves as alternatives to the state.[15]

Solid evidence of this lies in the Islamic State's seizure of northwest Iraq and eastern Syria and the establishment of the caliphate in June 2014. Ramifications of this will affect the stability and future of Iraq, Jordan, and Syria (the latter no longer constitutes a state), and the entire region's stability and security. The Islamic State generates shockwaves that, like falling dominoes, affect events in distant locations by encouraging subversive elements in the form of terrorist organizations and Salafist jihadists that share its ideology and methods. Examples of such groups are those operating within Libya, the Palestinian Authority, and the Sinai Peninsula, as well as terrorist infrastructures in Western Europe and Northern Africa.

Ethnic and religious divisions and the absence of a unifying national ethos is another significant feature of failed states. A striking example of this is Afghanistan: a multi-national state with various ethnic groups forced to live together. Ongoing friction and conflict have turned the country into a killing field of armed militias fighting each other despite the fact that all are Muslim.[16] Syria and Iraq, like Libya, Yemen, and even Lebanon, are similar. While each country has its own unique ethnic and tribal makeup, each suffers from ethnic and religious rifts and lacks a unifying national ethos.

This corresponds to what Benjamin Miller observes about the lack of correlation between the state and the nation – what he calls the state-to-nation imbalance – as a cause of instability and both internal and regional conflict. Such a condition differs from a coherent state in which the state correlates with the nation and in which borders and sovereignty are not disputed, government institutions are stable, and the government maintains a monopoly on the use of force.[17] According to Miller, even when elites in non-cohesive states try to reach a settlement, internal and external pressures eventually undermine their efforts.[18] There is no doubt that Iraq and Syria are prominent examples that lend weight to his claim. The Islamic State has exploited the processes of state failure in Syria and Iraq – both non-cohesive states – in order to spread, seize control, and entrench itself, and thus establish a caliphate. As David Reilly observes, the failed state phenomenon is not about to disappear, and the clash between functional, cohesive states and failed ones is inevitable.[19] The inevitability of the clash is partly due to the security threat generated by failed states. Organizations that export violence and terrorism to cohesive functional states operate in and from failed states even if they have no common borders. Globalization, technology, and accessibility to state weapons, including WMD, allow these

organizations to operate cross-border terrorism and sow chaos at low cost with relative ease. Therefore, notes Reilly, "weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states."[20] This insight is equally valid for Syria and Iraq, where the Islamic State – an entity that is becoming both a regional and international threat – has set up shop.

Failed states are incapable of enforcing their authority within and around their borders. This leads to the creation of outlying areas of lawlessness that become preferred environments for the activity of terrorist organizations. Global order and balance rely on the ability of states to preserve law and order within their borders. Therefore, every failed state upsets the world order to some degree or another. The results are global terrorism, mass civilian flight, and the creation of new refugees,[21] genocide, violations of basic human rights, local and international corruption, and rising crime.

Iraq is a conspicuous contemporary example of the processes of state failure. The deep rift between Sunnis and Shiites, coupled with Kurdish isolationism, affects the central government's legitimacy and performance. The central government's weakness is likewise manifest in the poor quality of the military and the frequent low level of discipline and loyalty in soldiers and units. All these factors weaken the state's hold on areas distant from the capital and create highly favorable conditions for the Islamic State. The Islamic State strengthens its hold by using terrorism and brutality against local residents while exploiting the Sunni population's hostility toward the Shiite government. These processes further weaken the central government, granting ethnic groups, such as the Kurds, opportunities to rid themselves of the state and establish independent entities that take turns seizing economic resources so as to further weaken the central government and its institutions.

In the post-Cold War era, internal security challenges, such as civil war, guerrilla warfare, and terrorism – all of which are associated with failed states – have been on the rise and become the chief threat to global as well as regional security in various arenas. Since World War II, more people have died as a result of these factors than from conflicts between regular armies.[22] Terrorist attacks, particularly 9/11, have made it clear to the international community that it cannot ignore a phenomenon that threatens the security of the entire globe. There are also far-reaching implications if several states designated as failed to some extent or other are in possession of ABC weapons (Pakistan, for example). The concern here is that nuclear weapons will fall

into undesirable hands. In Iraq, for example, stores of low enriched uranium were seized by the Islamic State in July 2014.[23]

Failed States and the Islamic State against the Backdrop of the Arab Upheaval

The increase in the number of failed states following the regional upheaval is an intensifying threat to the stability of the Middle East due to the growing impact of radical Islamic organizations in the area and the increased involvement of external actors in the affairs of failed states. External players may be states – as is Iran in Syria, Iraq in Yemen, or Saudi Arabia in both Yemen and Syria – or non-state actors, such as the Islamic State in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, and the Gaza Strip.

What at first glance seems to be a conflict among armed groups and government forces, as in Syria, Iraq, Libya, or Yemen, is in fact a conflict between regional and global powers, between Sunnis and Shiites, and even between moderate and radical Sunnis, as in the case of Syria, Libya, and the Gaza Strip. This means that Arab regimes are ever less capable of enforcing their will in their own territories, while the strength of the Islamic State grows and its influence spreads throughout the region and beyond. Confronting this phenomenon requires high levels of cooperation, the reinforcement of moderates in the region, determination, and global and regional leadership. Regional players have a crucial role to play; without them, the regional system will not be able to stabilize even if the world powers decide to invest tremendous resources into fighting the Islamic State and rebuild failed states.

After five years of upheavals, many states are on the brink of collapse or about to reorganize themselves according to diverse federal models. Independent state entities (such as the Kurds and the Islamic State) may be able to exist without recognition from a central government or the international community. It may be that the nation state is not the ideal model for certain areas of the Middle East. Perhaps models with specific federal features are more relevant to states divided by deep tribal, regional, and religious rifts, as are Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Palestinian Authority. While the international community opposes border changes and the collapse of existing states because it fears for the regional and global stability predicated on the building blocks of sovereign nation states, Arab peoples today seek the freedom to live in political settings that match their identities.[24]

Nation states such as Iraq and Syria are losing control of vast tracts of land that are falling into the hands of Salafist jihadist organizations, which desire to build the foundations of the new Islamic caliphate there and threaten to expand toward Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. On the other hand, the survival of the Islamic State is not preordained; its future hinges on its ability to spread and seize control despite opposition. The military power of the Islamic State seems limited. It cannot win a military confrontation against state armies, such as the Turkish army, and certainly not a confrontation against a coordinated military action organized by an alliance or coalition of Arabs armies with Turkish backing and international assistance. Iraq and Syria cannot meet the challenge on their own unless a dramatic change occurs in Iran's position or its involvement in present day affairs. The Kurds will continue to fight for their region and fend off Islamic State troops each time the latter try to breach Kurdish lines.

Thus with no regional coalition enjoying international support, the current situation is liable to become permanent and turn the Syrian-Iraqi expanses into a killing field for years to come.

Notes

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1   For an in-depth discussion of the failures of US strategy and its irrelevance, see Linda Robinson, Paul D. Miller, John Gordon IV, Jeffrey Decker, Michael Schwille, Raphael S. Cohen, *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR800/RR816/RAND_RR816.pdf. See also Michael Eisenstadt, "Aligning Means and Ends, Policies and Strategy in the War on ISIL," Testimony submitted to the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, Washington Institute, June 24, 2015, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/aligning-means-and-ends-policies-and-strategy-in-the-war-on-isil; Michael Eisenstadt, "The War Against ISIL: In Search of a Viable Strategy," Washington Institute, June 15, 2015, http://washin.st/1LaOWJt; "CIA Reorganizes for the Long War against Violent Extremism," *Middle East Briefing*, http://mebriefing.com/?p=1627; James F. Jeffrey, David Pollock, Robert Satloff, and Andrew J. Tabler, "The ISIS Fight and the State of the Union Address," *PolicyWatch 2358*, Washington Institute, January 21, 2015, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-isis-fight-and-the-state-of-the-union-address; Tina Kaidanow, "Expanding Counterterrorism Partnerships: U.S. Efforts to Tackle the Evolving Terrorist Threat," Washington Institute, January

26, 2015, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/expanding-counterterrorism-partnerships-u.s.-efforts-to-tackle-the-evolving.

2 Udi Dekel, Nir Boms, and Ofir Winter, *Syria: New Map, New Actors - Challenges and Opportunities for Israel*, Memorandum No. 151 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, December 2015).

3 On the importance of the correlation between identity and territory, and the instability that arises in the absence of this correlation, see Benjamin Miller, "When and How Regions Become Peaceful: Potential Theoretical Pathways to Peace," *International Studies Review* 7, no. 2 (2005): 229-67.

4 On the conditions in which non-state entities seize control of state functions, see Robert I. Rotberg, "Failed States in a World of Terror," *Foreign Affairs* (July-August 2002), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2002-07-01/failed-states-world-terror.

5 For more on the problematic global ramifications of failing states, see Amy Zegart, "Stop Drinking the Weak Sauce," *Foreign Policy,* February 23, 2015, http://goo.gl/amVuyz.

6 For more on the spread of jihadist organizations and the Islamic State, see Yoram Schweitzer, "Egypt's War in the Sinai Peninsula: A Struggle That Goes Beyond Egypt," *INSS Insight* No. 661, February 3, 2015, http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=8667.

7 The literature uses interchangeable terms such as "fragile state," "collapsed state," and "state failure." It is beyond the scope of this essay to analyze the reasons behind these various terms. For the sake of the current discussion, this chapter uses the term "failed state."

8 As stated in paragraph 143 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome (A/RES/60/1), entitled "Human Security," the heads of state and governments stressed "the right of all people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair," and recognized that "all individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy their rights and fully develop their human potential."

9 Francis Fukuyama, *State Building: Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Profile Books, 2005), pp. 1-3.

10 For more, see Fukuyama, *State Building*, pp. 3-7.

11 Carmit Valensi, "The Ruler and the Ruled: The Civilian Components in the Entrenchment of the Islamic State," *Shorty Blog*, Institute for National Security Studies, June 28, 2015, http://heb.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=5193&Blogid=9948.

12 Michael Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 391.

13 The Annual Fragile States Index, the Fund for Peace, 2014, http://ffp.statesindex.org/.

14 Fukuyama, *State Building*, p. 5.

15 Yoel Guzansky and Amir Kulick, "The Failed State: Ramifications for Israel's Strategic Environment," *Strategic Assessment* 13, no. 2 (2010): 39-54, http://www.inss.org.il/uploadimages/Import/(FILE)1283414450.pdf.

16 Mordechai Kedar, "America Leaves, Terrorism Enters," *Maraah Magazine for State, Society and Culture* 351, March 2014, http://www.maraah-magazine.co.il/show_item.asp?levelId=65470&ItemId=27&katavaId=3537&itemType=0.

17 Miller, "When and How Regions Become Peaceful: Potential Theoretical Pathways to Peace."

18 This claim recalls Azar's theory on internal forces that preserve the conflict in terms of the normal relations range (NRR). See: Edward E. Azar, Paul Jureidini, and Ronald McLaurin, "Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Practice in the Middle East," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8, no. 1 (1978): 41-60.

19 David Reilly, "The Two-Level Game of Failing States: Internal and External Sources of State Failure," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 28 (2008): 17.

20 Cited in Ibid. See "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2002," http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf.

21 For more on the refugee problem and its humanitarian significance and severe implications for regional security, see Benedetta Berti, "Syrian Refugees and Regional Security," *SADA Middle East Analysis*, February 5, 2015.

22 James Fearon and David Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75.

23 Michelle Nicholas, "Exclusive: Iraq tells U.N. that 'Terrorist Groups' Seized Nuclear Materials," *Reuters*, July 9, 2014.

24 Guzansky and Kulick, "The Failed State: Ramifications for Israel's Strategic Environment."