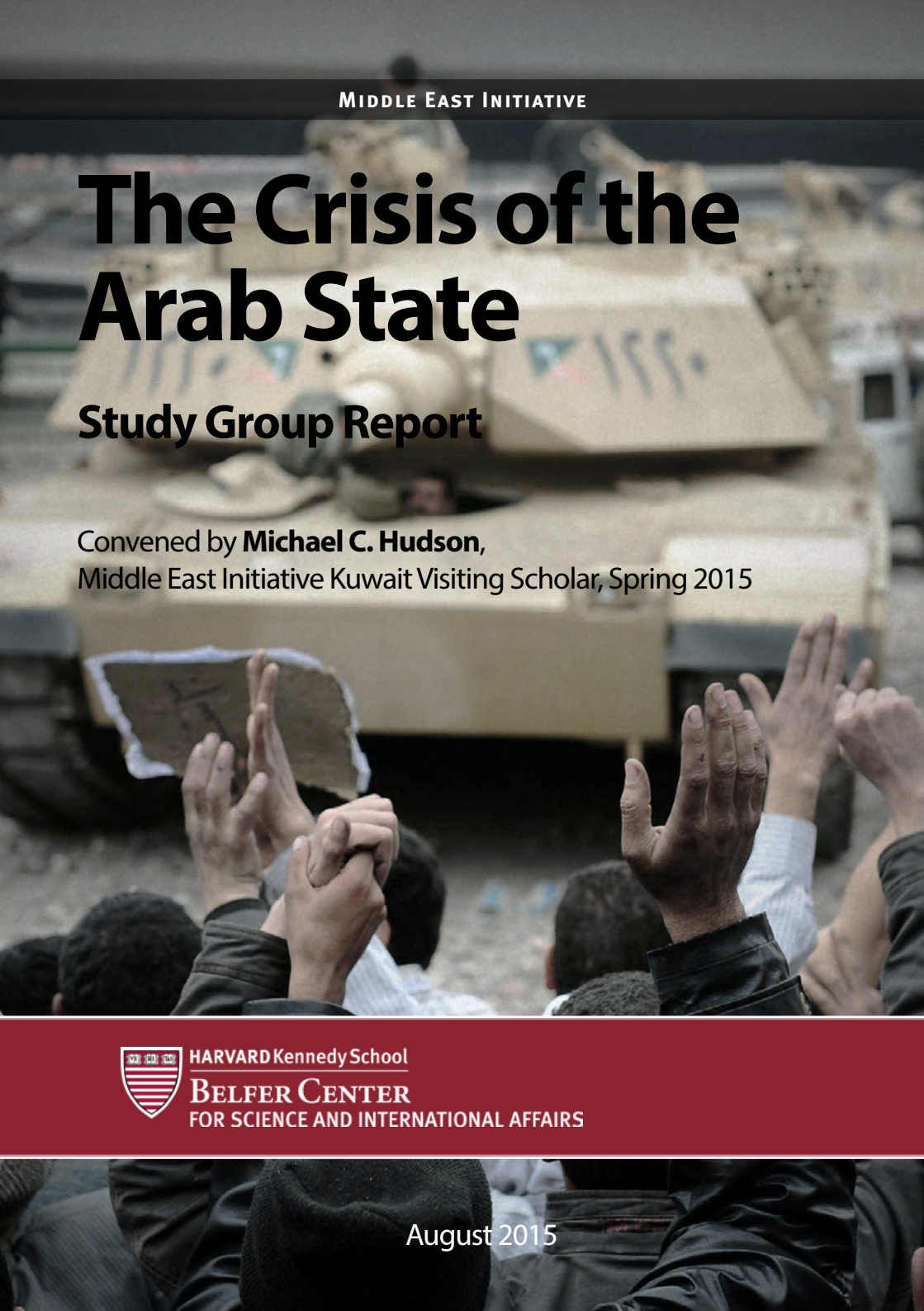

MIDDLE EAST INITIATIVE

The Crisis of the Arab State

Study Group Report

Convened by **Michael C. Hudson**,
Middle East Initiative Kuwait Visiting Scholar, Spring 2015

HARVARD Kennedy School
BELFER CENTER
FOR SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

August 2015

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Middle East Initiative

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1. Introduction

The Arab states and the Arab state system are undergoing a rapid erosion of legitimacy, especially since the 2011 uprisings. A combination of societal, economic, ideological, and exogenous pressures have exposed the weakest and challenged the strongest. Meanwhile "states in waiting" are emerging to fill the legitimacy vacuum of several established states. These are among the conclusions drawn from a study group, "Rethinking the Arab State," organized in the spring 2015 semester by Professor Michael C. Hudson under the auspices of the Middle East Initiative at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Eight leading scholars of the Middle East contributed to the discussion, tackling various aspects of this topic: Jillian Schwedler (Hunter College, City University of New York), Samer Shehata (University of Oklahoma), Madawi Al-Rasheed (London School of Economics), Yezid Sayigh (Carnegie Middle East Centre – Beirut), Bassam Haddad (George Mason University), Amaney Jamal (Princeton University), Lisa Wedeen (University of Chicago) and Stephen Walt (Harvard Kennedy School).

This report begins with a slightly abridged version of Professor Hudson's lecture for the first session on February 17th, reviewing the debate on the state among political scientists and commenting on the crisis of the state in the post-Arab uprising period. Then Prof. Hudson presents his notes (assisted by Chris Mawhorter) on the lectures of our visiting speakers. These notes should not be construed as a summary of the talks, which in all cases were excellent, comprehensive and nuanced, but simply as points of particular interest to Prof. Hudson. Full recordings of each lecture (except for Lisa Wedeen's) are

accessible on the Middle East Initiative's website: www.belfer-center.org/HudsonArabState. No attempt has been made to report on the discussions that followed each talk.

2. The Debate on the Arab State

The most important political development in the Arab world since the 1960s has been the growth and apparent consolidation of the state. If Arab politics until then had been characterized by fluidity, rapid unpredictable changes of regime, and unstructured protest, the trend since then has been toward acceptance of the state as the paramount framework within which political life is to be conducted. The death of Gamal Abdul-Nasser in 1970 did not just signal the decline of ideologically driven politics--and, in particular, a decline of the dominant pan-Arab nationalist ideology, an ideology intrinsically hostile to the existing state order. It also ushered in an era of rapid expansion in the bureaucracies that comprise the state and of the state's control and socioeconomic intervention. The Arab state drew

closer to the fundamental Weberian criterion of statehood--the institution with the preponderance of power in society. Whether, however, the Arab state was also increasingly being granted the legitimate authority to exercise that power was, as we shall see, by no means as clear. At the same time a greater degree of stability was introduced into the management of the Arab state: incumbent leaders and regimes remained in control of the levers of political power for longer periods of time than had been the case in the 1950s and 1960s.

"[After rapid bureaucratic expansion post-1970] the Arab state drew closer to the fundamental Weberian criterion of statehood ... but whether it also had the legitimate authority to exercise its power was ... by no means clear.."

The oil boom doubtless was a major contributor to the expansion of the Arab state although not the only one. The success of nationalist-revolutionary movements in the 1950s propelled into power leaders ideologically committed to building the state as the primary instrument for reforming society and achieving national (and pan-Arab) goals. These new regimes were able to appropriate the fruits of modernization and economic development for state-building, as their first priority: with a strong state, they reasoned, nation-building and society-building could then take place. The strong state they achieved, but they were less successful with nation-building; and as for society-building, the Arab leaders were ambivalent: they clearly placed great importance on economic development, but they showed considerable reluctance--indeed, often outright hostility--at the development of politically independent civil society.

If, as Karl W. Deutsch argued, politics is shaped by the modernization-fueled "race" between societal loads and political system capabilities, then we might say of the Arab countries that demands generally outran capabilities during the 1950s and 1960s, resulting in political disorder. But in the 1970s and 1980s the political system "caught up" by means of the rapid expansion of the state, channeling and suppressing societal demands. By the mid-1980s one could plausibly have argued that the state had "won the game" against society. Regimes, in general, were stable, public protest was almost nonexistent, social organizations that in a civil society normally support political activity independent of the state --parties, interest groups, professional associations, unions, the press, and the universities--were either incorporated into the regime or politically emasculated. But in politics--Arab politics included--the game is never "over," and by the beginning of the 1990s there were signs that the authoritarian Arab state might actually be retreating.

"By the mid-1980s one could plausibly have argued that the state had 'won the game' against society."

State vs. Society in Middle East Politics

While specialists on the Middle East were contemplating the mounting empirical evidence of growth of the Arab state in the 1970s, there was at the same time a movement in the realm of general theory for "bringing the state back in." This revisionist circle of historians and political scientists charged that the prevailing patterns in comparative politics--pluralism, structural-functionalism, and modernization--had incorrectly neglected the importance of the state as an institution whose growth and "presence" exerts significant, even decisive, effects on political behavior.[1] A lively debate ensued, with defenders of

"mainstream" political science contending, among other things, that the significance of the state and governing institutions had not been neglected, and that the statist school was reifying and even mystifying the concept of state, thus undoing the work of a generation of behavioralists who had sought to disaggregate it in order to analyze the interactions between society and "government," "the authorities," or "the political system" in all their multidimensionality.[2] Was the state more than the sum of its institutional parts? If so, how might one study it empirically, avoiding romantic and untestable assumptions about its essence or ontology? The state also began to elicit new attention as political economy approaches gained strength among political scientists because of its critical mediating, "gatekeeper" role between societies and the international economic and political order. If regime capabilities, especially in Third World rentier states, were often decisively shaped by the availability (or unavailability) of external financial resources, then the "state-as-actor" required direct analytic scrutiny.

Among students of Middle East politics, interest in the state and governmental institutions was hardly new: my own Arab Politics (1977) discussed governmental capabilities, while many other studies focused on elites (especially the military) and the role of strong executives.[3] Nevertheless, it is probably fair to say that "society-led" approaches dominated the field. On the whole, more attention was paid to modernization and political culture than to the state itself as an independent variable: certainly this was the thrust of two of the most influential books of the post-World War II period, Daniel Lerner's, The Passing of Traditional Society, and Manfred Halpern's The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa;[4] and this is also the emphasis in Arab Politics, notwithstanding its discussion of governmental capabilities.

The statist (or neo-statist) approach had begun to make itself felt by the 1980s as part of the general search for alternatives to the modernization paradigm. Marxist, neo-Marxist, and dependency theorists had brought the state back as a distinct institution, but mainly as the agent of the dominant classes or international financial forces. One of the most prominent Arab Marxists, Samir Amin, recognized the objective socio-economic conditions for socialist revolution yet, in the classical Marxist tradition, did not impute independent causal importance to the state itself. While qualifiedly sympathetic to the objectives of the Nasserist petit-bourgeois, anti-imperialist, nationalist state, he ultimately condemned it. He was skeptical of the progressive possibilities of either of the dominant Arab classes--the petit-bourgeoisie and the state bourgeoisie--and insisted that only the proletariat can break the stranglehold of underdevelopment. To mobilize this proletariat he called for a localist, mass-movement driven autarchy to break the grip of international capitalism on the state.[5] An important neo-Marxist variation was expressed by Hamza Alavi, who imputed to the state a certain autonomy deriving from the military-bureaucratic oligarchy's role as mediator among the three dominant classes: the indigenous bourgeoisie, the metropolitan neo-colonialist bourgeoisie, and the landed classes. "[A] new convergence of interests of the three competing propertied classes, under Metropolitan patronage, allows a bureaucratic-military oligarchy to mediate their competing but no longer contradictory interests and demands. By that token it acquires a relatively autonomous role and is not simply the instrument of any one of the three classes."[6]

"Was the state more than the sum of its institutional parts?"

In the dependency theory tradition, Guillermo O'Donnell put forward an important theory of the bureaucratic-authoritarian state, based on the Latin American experience but broadly relevant elsewhere in the Third World.[7] Arguing that while a populist form of government could be expected at an early stage of modernization, the constraints imposed by the international financial system through unequal terms of trade and debt would lead to the emergence of bureaucratic-authoritarianism as the "easy" stage of economic growth (import-substitution industrialization) gave way to tougher circumstances. Subsequently, he modified his theory to include the possibility that democratization might after all be an option, as the costs of suppressing an increasingly squeezed mass public (lo popular) came to be perceived as exceeding the costs of bureaucratic-authoritarian suppression.[8] Similarly, some neo-dependency writers like Cardoso and Falleto came to place more emphasis on indigenous class and society-centered factors than had the original "world-system" dependency theorists like Andre Gunder Frank.[9] Non-Marxist political economy theorists, notably John Waterbury in his work on Egypt, made a significant contribution on the question of the state's autonomy from dominant social forces.

But the return to the state was perhaps most prominently articulated for the Middle East, and from a generally more conservative theoretical orientation, by the project on "Nation, State and Integration in the Arab World," directed by Giacomo Luciani of the Institute of International Affairs in Rome and largely funded by the Ford Foundation.[10] Although one of the editors, Ghassan Salamé, remarked that Arab and Arabist scholars did not actually have to "bring the state back in" to their analyses, he and his collaborators clearly felt that the growth

of the Arab authoritarian state and the new general theoretical "rediscovery" of the state required that political scientists take a fresh look at this institution and its social and international context.[11] "Society-centered" analyses of the 1950s, 1960s, and even the 1970s, were taken to task for allegedly asserting the artificial (and presumably temporary) nature of the existing Arab states when, in fact, it now appeared that these states were both durable and resilient, having somehow advanced "beyond coercion" to legitimate themselves in the essentially immutable, perhaps "primordial" values of Arab culture.[12] The coercive capabilities of the Arab state have indeed advanced "beyond coercion," but whether they have also advanced in terms of acquiring legitimacy or prestige, is much more problematical.

But while some Middle East scholars were rediscovering the state, others were wondering whether the Middle Eastern state might actually be "retreating" in the face of a reinvigorated society. This trend was perhaps first articulated, though not systematically developed, in the deliberations of the Social Science Research Council-American Council of Learned Societies Joint Committee on the Near and Middle East in the early 1980s. In the words of the Committee's 1986 Research Agenda, "...the mass-mobilizing state, all-pervasive bureaucracy, mass production factory system and official culture, all stemming from the exuberant phase of nationalist state-building after independence, have become questionable, and among some groups resistance against them has acquired an aura of legitimacy..."[13] A fully developed analysis of the general proposition may be found in Joel Migdal's 1988 study of strong societies and weak states in the Third World.[14]

The debate on state and society in the Middle East has generated much interesting discussion but little consensus.[15] It has generated, however, some positive results. The "statists" are right to draw our attention to the bureaucratic-ideological structure that clearly stands astride, Leviathan-like, society in almost every Arab country. Whether or not analysts have neglected the Arab state is debatable, but it is especially important today to emphasize the extensive political resources available to whomever controls its bureaucratic levers. And given the growth and stability of state structures in recent years, it is also appropriate to reassess the extent to which the Arab state as such (or, public perception of it) now generates legitimacy and confers prestige upon the regimes that manage (possess?) it. Tedious disputes about the autonomy of the state may best be left to theoreticians, ideologists and their disciples. Let us instead focus our attention on the political capabilities of state structures and the image of the state as a source of legitimacy. Let us heed warnings not to mystify the state. Let us accept the suggestion to disaggregate it, considering it as a loosely integrated complex of bureaucracies, with internal politics of its own and multiple interfaces with society. But let us also remember that the state is not just another social organization but one that (as Weber stipulated) possesses legal order, bureaucracy, compulsory jurisdiction over a territory and monopolization of the legitimate use of force.[16] In this classical sense, the state is the ultimate instrument of power: in the Arab world, whoever controls it is likely (but not certain) to dominate society.

"...the state is not just another social organization... [it] is the ultimate instrument of power."

Arab States Since the 2011 Uprising

The uprisings of 2011 dramatically revealed the weakness of the Arab state. That earthquake unleashed aftershocks that are still continuing, and even states and ruling elites that did not experience severe protests were shaken. But the immediate aftermath of those protests also revealed the weakness in Arab societies. In almost all cases a coherent, effective opposition failed to materialize. As the Egyptian political scientist Nazih Ayubi contended, Arab states may not be strong, but they can still be fierce. Hence the reappearance of the "deep state" in Egypt and the dogged staying power of the Syrian state. And weak ones can be propped up by stronger neighbors: the survival chances of the monarchy in Bahrain were augmented by Saudi and UAE armed intervention.

The uprisings revealed something else: while no Arab state may be "strong" some are weaker than others. Indeed, four of them are in acute disintegration: Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya. Among the uprising states those with a claim to more historical continuity and cultural coherence—Tunisia and Egypt—came closer to a democratic transition than the others. Tunisia may be the only case in which a transition may be consolidated. Egypt, which in theory might have been considered ready for such a transition, moved part way; but the opposition, overshadowed by the Muslim Brotherhood, proved incapable of effectively organizing broad-based support; and the Brotherhood, with its history of being persecuted, proved unwilling to promote pluralism during its brief window of opportunity. As for the others, Libya and Yemen—the weakest states of the lot—sank into near-anarchy, at least for the short term. The Bahraini state became even a more dependent client of Saudi Arabia. In two of the "fiercest" states (often said to be "coup proof")—Iraq

and Syria—the hollowness of the edifice has been exposed. Iraq, of course, had its regime change in 2003 with the US-led invasion and occupation. The occupiers systematically dismantled the state and were unable to replace it with a stable order. Chaos has resulted.

And in Syria, a quintessentially hard and fierce state, the regime when challenged by ordinary citizens reacted with a paroxysm of violence, polarizing the situation and setting off a civil war. Would be reformers might then conclude that reforming the deep state is difficult, to say the least, but reforming very weak states, paradoxically, seems even more difficult.

The Arab uprisings and their ensuing volatile trajectories raised alarms among those states not directly affected. Saudi Arabia and the UAE led a virtual counter-revolution to preserve what was left of the old authoritarian order. To what extent did the Arab Gulf states (Bahrain excepted), Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority successfully resist the 2011 upheavals? It should be noted that two other Gulf states—Saudi Arabia and Oman—did experience protests, but not directed at the monarchy. So did Jordan and Morocco. Broadly speaking, the Gulf monarchies (and to a lesser extent Jordan and Morocco) successfully fielded the challenge by unleashing massive and immediate welfare programs. The military rulers of Algeria—a hard and fierce state—benefited from the war weariness of the Algerian population, which

> "The uprisings of 2011 dramatically revealed the weakness of the Arab state ... but the immediate aftermath of those protests also revealed the weakness in Arab societies."

suffered greatly during the civil war of the 1990s. A similar factor may have been in play in Lebanon, which experienced its own civil war(s) between 1975 and 1990. As for the Palestinians still in search of a proper state, the Israeli occupation puts them in a different situation; but it must be said that the Palestine Authority based in the West Bank faced—and faces—its own opposition from Hamas. In all these cases state and regime survival was also enhanced by the support of the United States and other global big powers.

"Perhaps it is not surprising that a non-state (indeed anti-state) movement like Islamic State has emerged..."

Perhaps it is not as surprising as it first seemed that a non-state (indeed anti-state) movement like Islamic State (ISIS or Da'ish) has emerged as a state-in-waiting. It is not the only one, of course. The Kurdish regional government in what is left of Iraq possesses almost all but the most formal attributes of statehood. South Sudan, split off from the Republic of Sudan, is Africa's newest state. Puntland and Somaliland are autonomous statelets in fractured Somalia. As Yemen disintegrates, the movement for southern secession grows, raising the possibility of the reappearance of a south Yemen state.

But Da'ish is a special case inasmuch as it has partially dismembered two key countries which were once regarded as prime examples of the durable authoritarian Arab mukhabarat state—Iraq and Syria—and threatens several others. Offering up a completely different legitimacy formula from the old nationalism and patrimonialism of the established states, it aims to

erase old boundaries and establish, over and against the present geographic state system a new (or, they might say, a renewed) state—a caliphate. Having made its violent appearance in Iraq and Syria (where it has, for the moment, a territorial base) it also has a growing presence in Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula, in Egypt's Sinai and Western deserts, and lately in Libya. It also has cells and sympathizers in Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia and Algeria. The existing Arab state system is firmly bolstered by American and European power—military, political and economic—so the weakness of particular Arab states might not be fatal in confrontation with what ISIS has to offer. But the emergence of this movement alone indicates that the Arab state as we have come to know it is indeed a flawed creation. Arab states (and regimes) still struggle for legitimacy, and the key to that legitimacy may be the establishment of genuinely participatory institutions. Clearly, this is not an easy task.

›› Listen to full audio of Professor Hudson's introductory lecture

"The Arab States in Crisis: the Collapse of Old Legitimacy Formulas and the Search for New Ones"

at **http://ow.ly/Qqjjw**

3. Selected Points from the Lectures by Visiting Speakers

Jillian Schwelder

"Islamic Politics in the Age of ISIS"

"Even though ISIS is geographically in a specific area, it is bleeding into all these concerns … the context [of Islamist politics] is significantly different than it was before the uprisings and I don't think…our moderate and radical binary helps us make sense of this."

Listen to the full lecture at: http://ow.ly/PZwfD

Jillian Schwedler (Professor of Political Science at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York) spoke on Islamist politics in the age of ISIS on February 25th. Islamist political movements, she contended, are challenging the status quo of states and the state system in the

Middle East. They also present analytical challenges to political scientists, journalists and diplomats. The "moderate vs. radical" formulation is too simple. By focusing narrowly on the groups themselves, analysts have given insufficient attention to how populations have actually received Islamist groups. Some of these movements are "moderate"—i.e., working more or less "within the system" in their countries (e.g. Hamas in Palestine, Hizballah in Lebanon) but are definitely understood as radical to others in the region such as Israel. Moderates and radicals often share the same goal—Islam as pillar of the state. But they adopt different means (radicals would destroy established states; moderates would work within the system). She observed that established states and regimes vent most of their fury on the moderates rather than the radicals, Syria being a case in point. ISIS was a game-changer for the other radical Islamist movements. With its territorial focus it appears to have overtaken Al-Qa'ida in influence and with its transnational reach has, as it were, outbidden state-focused movements such as the Taliban, Hamas, and Hizballah. While many Middle East scholars have been reluctant in the past to privilege religious sectarianism as an independent variable, there is little doubt that it has lately emerged as a huge factor on the Middle East political scene. Sunni-Shi'a antipathy now polarizes the Islamist political landscape and has reshaped the balance of power in the regional state system.

Samer Shehata

"The Resurgence of Egypt's 'Deep State'?"

"The idea of a 'deep state' presupposes the existence of at least a nominal democracy … We didn't need a deep state in Egypt, we had military men."

Listen to the full lecture at: http://ow.ly/PZxcm

Samer Shehata (Associate Professor of Middle East Studies, University of Oklahoma) lectured on the resurgence of Egypt's "deep state" on March 3rd. He began his talk by questioning the appropriateness of the "deep state" concept itself in application to Egypt. He noted that the term has been borrowed from the Turkish case. But the Turkish case was different in that it has had a history of (semi) democratic politics—with political parties and elections—beneath which the military and the secular state bureaucracies (guardians of the Ataturk tradition) would periodically suspend formal democratic practices. Egypt,

however, didn't have that tradition of democratic practices. Instead, it was ruled by authoritarian military officers, beginning with the Free Officers' coup of 1952; and even after the fall of Mubarak in 2011 the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) called the tune. Unlike Turkey where its deep state had an ideology—the secular modernizing principles of Ataturk, in Egypt the keepers of the so-called "deep state" didn't—it was just the SCAF incumbents protecting their turf. The military, it was noted, runs a sizeable parallel economy. Shehata detailed the controlling hand of the SCAF in the several constitutional struggles leading up to the narrow victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012. By that time the SCAF had succeeded in weakening the powers of the president. Senior military officers were successful in working to protect themselves and their "state within a state" (but not necessarily a "deep state"). Perhaps the key question now is whether the enfeebled associations in Egypt's civil society, and the forces that more-or-less spontaneously precipitated the fall of Mubarak can reverse the short-circuiting of Egypt's short-lived "spring." For the short run at least, Shehata was not optimistic.

Madawi Al-Rasheed

"Not So Good to be King: the Saudi Monarchy at Crossroads"

"The conditions that explain the so-called resilience of [Saudi] monarchy, are also extremely dangerous. … [Saudi divide and rule policies create] dividing lines so entrenched that in a crisis, they may develop into something more sinister, [leading to] the polarization and fragmentation of the Saudi empire as we have known it."

Listen to the full lecture at: http://ow.ly/Q0i4N

Madawi Al-Rasheed (Visiting Professor, Middle East Centre, London School of Economics) attracted a large audience with her provocative lecture, "Not so good to be king: the Saudi monarchy at the crossroads" on March 10th, less than two months after King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz ascended to the throne. Challenging the conventional narrative of a benevolent royal family rooted in Islamic legitimacy restoring and protecting the national unity of the Saudi people, which she described as a "top-down" approach, she offered a "bottom-up" analysis

focusing on societal factors and how the regime manipulates them to its own advantage. Their strategy, she said, is threefold: 1) to exploit what is in fact a society and culture segmented along several lines: gender, citizens vs. foreign labor; and the ideological divide between Islamists and liberals; 2) to utilize a combination of religion and repression to propagate and preserve regime authority; 3) to take advantage of regional turmoil in order to exact loyalty and delegitimize protest. In this respect Da'ish serves a useful purpose, and the Saudi-led bombing in Yemen against the Houthi movement elicits strong domestic support. But of course regional turmoil is a two-edged sword. The Saudi-led "counter-revolution" against the Arab uprisings, in an age of growing political awareness in Saudi society, is possibly a risky strategy. Dr. Al-Rasheed offered several policy recommendations: the regime should provide space for society to express itself; it should stop co-opting prominent critics; it should curb its repression of opposition figures; it should be mindful of the concerns of the new youthful generation; and it should stop instrumentalizing religion for domestic and foreign policy purposes. The new king and his entourage face serious challenges, she contended.

Yezid Sayigh

"ISIS: a 'State in Waiting'"

"The Islamic State has very much got the DNA of the Saddam Hussein state…ISIS understands that the fundamental means, if not goal, is to create and hold onto power—state power—and al-Qaeda never got into that."

Listen to the full lecture at: http://ow.ly/Q0ilN

Yezid Sayigh (Senior Associate and Professor, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut) spoke to an overflow crowd on "ISIS: A State in Waiting? on March 31st.

His provocative thesis was that Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL, Da'esh) is—in organizational and strategic terms--a clone of the Saddam Hussein's Iraqi mukhabarat state. The heart of ISIS, he contended, is Iraqi. Abu Bakr Baghdadi mimics Saddam through his deliberately brutal behavior and his ruthless consolidation of power. But being Iraqi is also a drawback as it seeks to extend its domination in Syria, where it is challenged by the Al-Qa'ida-linked Al-Nusra Front, which has a stronger Syrian base. ISIS

wants to control a territorial state, which differentiates it from Al-Qa'ida. Indeed, it is trying to defeat the Al-Qa'ida movement in order to establish itself as the sole legitimate expression of political Islam. On the one hand ISIS engages in a brutal, almost theatrical, use of violence against opponents. But on the other hand, it is seriously trying to govern its territories better than the Baghdad or Damascus did by fighting corruption, providing security, and utilizing local economic resources to provide basic services. Like Al-Qa'ida, ISIS has established "franchises" in several Arab countries, but unlike Al-Qa'ida, whose franchises are essentially autonomous, it dominates its satellite branches in the manner that Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party controlled its local affiliates. Contrary to the popular image of ISIS as fundamentally religious, Sayigh contended that ISIS's Islamic ideology is more practical than theological. While it espouses a global jihad it actually focuses on its home base. Its power base is in Iraq, and that is where it has to be defeated. It projects itself as a state while undermining the existing state projects in Iraq and Syria; but that objective has mobilized its foes regionally and internationally. ISIS, he concluded, has been successful in creating momentum to attract its various audiences outside, but it will have to keep delivering battlefield successes or else it will begin to appear vulnerable to its home audience.

Bassam Haddad

"The Syrian State: a Stateless Regime or State with Many Regimes"

"Today we are witnessing a lot more than a Syrian uprising … several opposition groups are trying with varying degrees of success or failure to approximate a state."

Listen to the full lecture at: http://ow.ly/Q0iFB

Bassam Haddad (Associate Professor and Director, Middle East and Islamic Studies Program, George Mason University), author of an important book on state-business relations in Syria, lectured on April 2nd on "The Syrian state: a stateless regime or a state with many regimes?" (The subtitle reminds us not to conflate "state" and "regime": it is important to make the distinction, recognizing, however, that there may be cases in which state and regime are virtually indistinguishable from one another, such as, perhaps, Saudi Arabia or Qadhafi's Libya.) In the case of Syria, Haddad was not explicit but seemed to be leaning toward the latter formulation: a state with at least three (or maybe five or six!) regimes: first, the Asad regime with its

base in the security and administrative bureaucracies, and the support of parts of key constituences—the Alawite community, the Sunni bourgeoisie, and the minorities, controlling the urban spine and the northwest coastal territory. Second, there is the ISIS regime—aspiring to be a state—with its considerable territory to the east and into Iraq, possessing substantial armed force and drawing on disaffected rural Sunni communities. Third, there are the "mixed territories" in the north and south, opposed to both Assad and ISIS, yet not really a coherent "regime" inasmuch as power is dispersed among several "authorities" including the Al-Qa'ida linked Al-Nusra Front, the groups identified with the Free Syrian Army ("moderate" Western-supported elements), and Syrian Kurdish forces. Two of these groups ISIS and the Kurds have "regime qualities" and Nusra might come close. Their control isn't uniform but in general they have "regime" (perhaps even state-like) qualities: monopoly of violence and an effective administrative infrastructure: they pay salaries and subsidies, possess adjudication abilities, and provide security in the territory they control. Haddad noted also that Syria—the state--is a "regional pivot" in three interlocking conflicts, first, in the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in both its sectarian and political/strategic aspects. Second, Syria is also a pivot in the struggle of extremists vs. the Iraqi government; and third, it is also a pivot in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The US and Saudi Arabia are at odds with Turkey and Qatar over Syria, as are the US and Russia. Haddad contended that the Asad regime's strategy was (a) to militarize the conflict (forcing the opposition to do the same, to its disadvantage); (b) to support radicalization of opposition; and (c) to focus on destroying opposition strongholds in cities, not hesitating to use brutal means—chemical weapons, air power and barrel bombs. But the opposition's fatal mistake was allowing the prioritization of military conflict. The opposition's external supporters

underestimated regime resilience and overestimated opposition cohesion. While reluctant to make predictions, Haddad observed that Bashar Al-Assad is losing momentum (22,000 soldiers killed in 2014) and is having to rely ever more on the Lebanese Hizballah forces. He also noted that Iran's support might diminish or at least not increase, especially if a deal is reached between Iran and the Americans and their European partners over Iran's nuclear program. The year 2015 might thus be "a pivotal year" for Syria.

Amaney Jamal

"United States Military Deployments and the Status of Women in the Arab World"

"Most explanations of the status of women in the Arab world are cultural or religious, but these explanations ignore the politics…we need to focus more on how the international location of the Arab world has affected domestic level politics."

Listen to the full lecture at: http://ow.ly/Q0iWt

Amaney A. Jamal (Professor of Politics at Princeton University) made a presentation on April 7th on US military deployments and the status of women in the Arab world. On its face, this topic might seem to have been outside the focus of the study group, but in fact the Arab state plays a crucial intervening role in her thesis. She began by noting that most studies of the status of women in the Arab world see women's issues as a function of internal forces in Arab societies. Without disputing that approach she seeks additional explanatory factors—among them exogenous forces. Dr. Jamal's central argument was that

the greater the US military deployments in the region, the worse the status of women. This is because regimes and states hosting a sizeable US military presence feel compelled to mollify their conservative constituencies who oppose the foreign intrusion; and a good way to do this is by decreasing regime commitment to women's rights. States concede to Islamist demands on (domestic) women's issues instead of to their demands on curbing foreign military "intrusion". This what she described as "the women's bargain." How does this "bargain" occur? After a US troop build-up Islamists (and other nationalist groups) take to the streets and start criticizing foreign security cooperation in parliament or other public platforms, so the regime switches the official conversation to the domestic issue of women's rights and gives up whatever initiatives it may have started as a sop to the Islamists. Thus the US troop presence can lead to anti-government protests (often organized by Islamists) which in turn have a dampening effect on improving women's status. Based on a quantitative analysis, she and a colleague found that the numbers of troops and the political strength of Islamist movements are negatively correlated with women's rights outcomes, including when controlling for the positive time trend in women's rights (which is linked to the global trend toward improvement in women's rights). Her findings show that this is especially true in countries with a high Islamist presence or threat. She showed, therefore, how an exogenous military intervention (even when invited by the regime) intended to bolster regime security can have unintended side effects in domestic politics. State weakness thus matters, and some Arab states are very weak indeed. In conclusion, Dr. Jamal observed that the rights of disadvantaged and minority groups—especially women—are directly linked to regime negotiations to maintain power by acquiescing both to Islamist and US demands.

Lisa Wedeen

"Abandoning 'Legitimacy': Reflections on Syria and Yemen"

Lisa Wedeen (Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago) spoke on "Abandoning 'Legitimacy': Reflections on Syria and Yemen" on April 14th. She began with a methodological point on the need for political scientists to abandon legitimacy as a social science concept—even though, regrettably, is seems to be even more prevalent in the discussions of the Arab world today. The concept, in her view, lacks clarity. It subsumes three meanings: 1) a moral right to rule; 2) the popularity of the regime; and 3) a general belief in the appropriateness of the political order. She took Max Weber to task for his slippage between what is lawful and what is considered lawful, and for making a legal term sociological. Context is all-important. One must ask: legitimacy for whom? The analyst cannot just take polls to answer the question of how legitimate is a state or regime, and one must not conflate legitimacy with manifest obedience or consent. She asked, rhetorically, how one can deal with the coercive behavior of "legitimate" regimes—a reference to contemporary Syria. On Syria, she contrasted the

authoritarian nationalism of Hafiz Al-Asad with the "neo-liberal autocracy" of his son Bashar, in which the regime projected a fantasy of upward mobility, the good life, multisectarian tolerance, and order, exemplified by a glamorous first family, the incorporation of global information inflows through new information technologies and social media, and the creation of "GONGOs"—false, government-operated NGOs promoting the illusion of autonomous civil society. This strategy proved moderately effective in the early years of his regime but has now been eroded as the civil war grinds on. Reflecting on the seductions and weaknesses of Syria's neoliberal autocracy in particular, her presentation charted its unmaking—including the ascendance of the Islamic state and the sowing of sectarian dissension. She blamed regime for militarizing the opposition, and she blamed the Gulf states, Turkey, Russia and the US for exacerbating the conflict. As for ISIS, in her view it offers no clear alternative to Assad's neoliberal autocracy. She concluded her remarks on Syria by showing excerpts from a video from ISIS-ruled Raqqa produced by VICE showing how ISIS promotes the Islamic injunction of hisbah [accountability; enjoining good and forbidding evil]: one sequence showed ISIS "policemen" in a pickup truck checking for price-gouging in the marketplace, and politely telling a man to get his wife to cover up a little better. In the discussion period she briefly touched upon the chaos in Yemen, criticizing the Saudi-led air bombardment of the Houthis (who cannot be considered as Iranian puppets and not authentically Yemeni).

For more, see: news.vice.com/video/the-islamic-state-part-3

Stephen M. Walt

"Can the United States 'Manage' the Middle East? Should It Try?"

"If no single state dominates the entire Middle East region, most American goals can be advanced. They don't require the U.S. to control the Middle East directly... It's hard enough to manage politics in places we really do understand – like Boston or California. It's exceedingly difficult to do it in places where detailed knowledge is lacking."

Listen to the full lecture at: http://ow.ly/Q0wLY

Stephen M. Walt (Professor of International Relations, Harvard Kennedy School) gave a lecture to a full house in the final session of the study group on April 29 entitled "Can the US manage the Middle East? Should it Try?" He declared that the answer to both questions was an emphatic no. He offered an incisive realist critique of what he sees as American overreach and stupidity in its Middle East involvements—involvements far deeper than necessary because Washington has fewer vital interests

there than it admits. He conceded that US policymakers are well-intentioned but they are failing to manage the region for six reasons: 1) wrong goals; 2) contradictory policies; 3) lack of patience in "nation-building"; 4) wrong tools (overemphasis on the military and, in particular, drones); 5) policies undermined by he considered America's too-"special" relationships with Israel and Saudi Arabia; and 6) the recycling the same old officials despite their long record of mistakes. In response to questions as to what the US should do as the Middle East disintegrates, he replied that the US should do no harm and should engage in offshore balancing. He favors a more normal relationship with Iran, bringing it back in as a normal (and important) player in Middle East affairs. He also favored a US pivot to Asia—a region that is strategically and economically much more important than the Middle East, where—to his regret--America seems to be permanently bogged down. This trenchant critique of US policy throws light on the broader question of interest to the study group: how the permeability of the region, with its weak states and regimes and valuable natural resources attracts outside involvement. As the historian L. Carl Brown has written, the Western big powers have been irresistibly attracted to this region at least since the eighteenth century, but while they have dominated it for long periods they have never really been able to manage it. In this sense the United States has followed Britain, France, and Russia, but has not learned much from their mistakes. Great Power interference may have imposed periodic stability and even growth, but it has not generally enhanced the legitimacy of local states and regimes. Outside military power seems a blunt and not very effective instrument for state and nation-building in today's Middle East.

4. Concluding Thoughts

As is often the case, academic endeavors usually conclude with more questions ("for further study") than answers. This study group was no different. But there appeared to be some common themes.

4.1 **The Arab states vary among themselves in terms of "stateness" and legitimacy.** Some are more "rooted" than others: Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. Others are "shallow": Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraqi Kurdistan. Still others are wealthy rentier "family" states: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. And then there is the "state in waiting": ISIS.

4.2 **Notwithstanding these variations, all of them face serious issues of security, governance, and participation.** In none do we find a vibrant civil society effectively integrated into the political process.

4.3 **The Arab uprisings of 2011 signaled the beginning of a long process of political change and a challenge to the legitimacy of the existing states and regimes.** It is premature and facile to assert that a participatory "spring" has given way to an authoritarian "winter."

4.4 **The trajectories of the Arab uprisings revealed that a more vibrant civil society still lacks the organizational coherence and leadership to replace old autocracies with stable, more broadly participatory structures.**

4.5 **Whatever they may lack in legitimacy, Arab states do possess significant bureaucratic capabilities, and there are powerful interests embedded in state structures**; so one might not expect a wholesale redrawing of geographic boundaries, although the territorial integrity of Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya appears to be at risk.

4.6 **Underpinning the present political turbulence are the pressing socioeconomic problems of inequality, unemployment, public infrastructure, deficient education, and growth.** Corruption is endemic and a major cause of illegitimacy. Neo-liberal economic strategies are part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

4.7 **In the vacuum created by collapsed dictatorships, political Islam in various forms (ISIS, Al-Qa'ida, and others) has flourished, while the liberal "center" so far lacks comparable voice.** But political Islam is far from monolithic or cohesive, as the rivals to ISIS demonstrate.

4.8 **Intra-Islamist sectarianism (Sunni vs. Shi'a) is a more potent political phenomenon than inter-religious sectarianism (Muslim-Christian, Muslim-Jewish).** Regimes that have fueled sectarianism for their own immediate purposes risk long-term negative consequences: sectarianism is easier to inflame than to contain.

4.9 **External interventions by the United States and other major powers, particularly through military means, ostensibly to promote democracy and stability, have failed to do so.** The Middle East can no longer be "managed" by outside powers.

4.10 **Issues for further study.** While these matters were touched upon in various sessions of the study group, more work needs to be done on the following:

- The relationships between regime and state.
- Are we talking about regime legitimacy or state legitimacy?
- The utility of the legitimacy concept, in light of Wedeen's critique.
- Why has civil society "failed" to develop and sustain a new order?
- How can outside states assist, without making matters worse?

For lecture recordings, photos, and more, visit

Rethinking the Arab State

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Notes:

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2 See Gabriel A. Almond, "The Return to the State," American Political Science Review, 82, 3 (September 1988), pp. 853-74; and critiques of his article by Eric A. Nordlinger, Theodore J. Lowi, and Sergio Fabbrini, pp. 875-904.

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6 Hamza Alavi, "The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh," New Left Review, 74 (July-August 1982), pp. 59-72; p. 60.

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11 Salamé, "Introduction" to vol. I, Foundations..., esp. p. 15.

12 See in particular I. William Zartman, "Introduction" to vol. III, Beyond Coercion..., pp. 1-13.

13 Peter von Sivers, "Retreating States and Expanding Societies: The State Autonomy/Informal Civil Society Dialectic in the Middle East

and North Africa: Research Agenda, 1986-87," Joint Committee on the Near and Middle East of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, New York. This was the preparatory document for a Commitee-sponsored conference held in Aix-en-Provence in 1988.

14 Joel Migdal, Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988). See esp. ch. 5 on Egypt.

15 For a helpful and straightforward account, see Lisa Anderson, "The State in the Middle East and North Africa," Comparative Politics, ADD: X, X (October, 1987), pp. 1-18. See also Leonard Binder, "The Natural History of Development Theory, with a Discordant Note on the Middle East," chap. 2 in Binder, Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, for an exegesis of competing philosophical schools.

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