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FPC Briefing: *Daesh*, Geopolitics and the Resurgence of Pan Arabism?
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Events in the Middle East over the past half-decade have had a dramatic impact upon regional relations. The tumultuous period framed as the Arab Uprisings initially brought hope before a period of despair, with political aspirations somewhat inevitably crushed by security calculations. While authoritarianism initially appeared to be on the wane, subsumed by popular discontent, the struggle between regime and society has resulted in the re-emergence of authoritarian rule across the region.

Adding to the complexity of state-society relations is the emergence of *daesh*, a vociferously Sunni, fundamentalist organisation (also known as ISIS or ISIL) that has destroyed regional relations in a way not seen since the revolution of 1979 in Iran. The seizure of territory in Syria and Iraq dramatically altered the nature of Middle Eastern geopolitics, resulting in millions of refugees fleeing into neighbouring states and hundreds of thousands within Syria and Iraq being internally displaced. The aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, coupled with the emergence of *daesh*, fears about which have been furthered by declarations of support for the group across the region, have forced regimes in the Middle East to reconsider domestic security strategies along with their approach to regional security. This briefing explores the changing nature of geopolitics in the Middle East, by considering four themes: a rising sectarianism; territorial challenges; military responses; and regional consequences.

A Rising Sectarianism?
In understanding the changing nature of Middle Eastern geopolitics, an immediate starting point seems to be the increase in sectarian driven violence across the region. While the emergence of *daesh* seems to support the argument that sectarian violence is on the rise, in understanding this trend one must revisit the Iranian revolution in 1979.

The 1979 revolution in Iran added a religious dimension to regional relations that had previously been shaped by geopolitical questions over regional hegemony and about how to ensure regional security.[1] However, with the establishment of an Islamic republic in Iran that was vociferously Shi'a and sought to derive legitimacy from its Islamic credentials, Islamic competition fed into geopolitical considerations. Perhaps this is best seen in the Iranian constitution and Article 3.16, which seeks to offer support for the 'downtrodden' of the Muslim world,[2] reflecting the prominence of Shi'a values - especially the Karbala Narrative[3] - within the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.[4]

The Al Saud, whose centuries old alliance with the vehemently anti-Shi'a Wahhabi sect of Islam[5] provided them with the legitimacy that had enabled them to establish a state in Arabia and, whose position as the protectors of the two holy mosques were immediately threatened by the establishment of a new state. For the Al Saud, Islam provides a key source of domestic (and regional) legitimacy, although, in using the fundamentalist tenets of Wahhabism as a legitimising tool meant that Islam became a 'double edged sword',[6] wherein religion was both a source of legitimacy and

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[1] Simon Mabon, Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

[2] Iranian Constitution, Article 3.16. Available from: www.alaviandassociates.com/documents/constitution.pdf

[3] Rola El-Husseini, 'Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria', In Third World Quarterly, Vol. 31, No. 5, (2010), p805. The Karbala Narrative relates to the battle in 680 BC/BCE which led to the death of Shia Martyr Husayn ibn Ali.

[4] Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'The Foreign Policy of Iran', In Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.) The Foreign Policies of Middle East States (London: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 2002), p284

[5] Joseph Teitelbaum, The Shiites of Saudi Arabia (Centre on Islam, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World, 2010), Available from: http://www.hudson.org/research/9895-the-shiites-of-saudi-arabia

[6] See: Madawi Al Rasheed, A History of Saudi Arabia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp138-9 and Joseph Nevo, 'Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia', In Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 34, No. 3, (1998), p50.

also a source of criticism when regimes were not perceived to be acting in an Islamic way. The ideological nature of *daesh*, which possesses a fundamentalist vision that some including Madawi Al Rasheed suggest is closely linked to the Salafism vision of Wahhabism,[7] means that the Al Saud face serious ideological challenges from the group. Furthermore, *daesh* vociferous anti Shi'a agenda posits itself against the Islamic Republic of Iran, seemingly leaving Saudi Arabia and Iran with a shared enemy.

After the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry increased, along with and -perhaps facilitated by - a rise in sectarianism across the region. The emergence of new spaces for competition included competition in Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.[8] While overt conflict between the two did not emerge, as Madawi Al Rasheed notes, the Saudis have (tacitly) allowed their radicals to 'cause mayhem' in the Levant,[9] in essence enacting an anti-Shi'a foreign policy. Further complicating the nature of regional politics were the Arab Uprisings, which opened up fissures within state-society relations. These relations historically have been tense, stemming from decades of authoritarianism across the region, along with discrimination towards Shi'a populations, in the Gulf, predominantly as a consequence of perceptions about their loyalty towards Iran.[10] As a means of ensuring stability, regimes sought to frame protests along sectarian or Islamist lines,[11] further adding to friction within states and shaping the nature of regional relations.

Inherent within contemporary understandings of sovereignty is the interaction of territoriality, authority, citizenship and autonomy.[12] As such, ideas about territory are inherently linked to those of sovereignty, bounded in the Western notion of a nation-state, despite the apparent problems linked to the tribal, religious and ethnic melange across the Middle East. The rise of *daesh* poses a serious challenge to the idea of a territorially based, nation-state, with the emergence of a transnational caliphate undercutting the map of sovereign states in the region.

The failure of states to ensure security and stability within their territorial borders and to protect their citizens goes some way to eroding state sovereignty (through ensuring autonomy) but also erodes state legitimacy. As such, regimes across the region, many of whom face facing the double challenge of increased friction within state-society relations, along with the external threat[13] posed by *daesh*. As Marc Lynch *et al* argue in a recent Project on Middle East Democracy report entitled *The Arab Thermidor: The Resurgence of the Security State*,[14] the response to the uprisings has resulted in almost all regimes across the region becoming 'more intolerant and more repressive',[15] with the chaos allowing for extremist movements such as *daesh* to thrive.

Territorial Challenges
Daesh's existence and popularity among particular groups in the region not only poses a considerable threat to regime legitimacy, but also challenges the very concept of territoriality being inherently linked to sovereignty and to the nation-state. The rise of a transnational caliphate under

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[7] Madawi Al Rasheed, The Shared History of Saudi Arabia and DAESH (Hurst, 28.11.14), available at: http://www.hurstpublishers.com/the-shared-history-of-saudi-arabia-and-daesh/
[8] Simon Mabon, FPC Briefing: Constructing Sectarianisms and Conflict in the Middle East Available at: http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/1614.pdf
[9] Al Rasheed, 2014, Op. Cit.
[10] Perceptions of loyalty to Iran has resulted in accusations that Shi'a groups are 'fifth columns', which have furthered divisions within states, often resulting in increased discrimination and violence.
[11] Especially in the case of Bahrain and Syria. In Egypt, they were framed along Islamist lines.
[12] See, in particular, James Caporaso, Changes in the Westphalian Order: Territory, Public Authority, and Sovereignty, International Studies Review, Vol.2, No.2.
[13] One should also note the potential internal threat, stemming either from the idea of a 'double-edged sword', as is the case in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, or from the framing of opposition along Islamist terms, as is the case in Egypt.
[14] The Arab Thermidor: The Resurgence of the Security State, (POMED, 2015) available at: http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/POMEPS_Studies_11_Thermidor_Web.pdf
[15] Ibid., p3.

the rule of 'caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, encompassing territories in Syria, Iraq and Libya, is drastically challenging the geopolitical equilibrium of the region, shaped by the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. The stipulation of Western areas of interest and control in the region without any real consideration for cultural and religious differences came with strong implications that are shaping regional politics today, as the abundance of secessionist groups and the escalation of sectarian conflicts clearly demonstrates.[16] However, even though various Middle Eastern states[17] have historically been opposite to the idea of Western-imposed artificial borders, the territorial construction of the region has not undergone significant changes since then.

By breaching Middle Eastern states' territories, *daesh* is also inherently infringing on their sovereignty, exposing various governments' inability to provide for their citizens within their own territory and therefore directly challenging their legitimacy.[18] At the same time, *daesh* is also subscribing to the notion of a caliphate that is transnational in nature, but also resting within a controlled territory. The control of militarily gained territories in Iraq and Syria is reinforced through a style of governance whose core pillars are clearly declared and explained in *daesh* publications and aimed at effectively replacing the governance structures of the nation state.[19] By claiming the responsibility to govern both the religious and political life, *daesh* is presenting al-Baghdadi as a religious leader and elder statesman, therefore projecting the caliphate as being meant to take over all the responsibilities of a traditional state.

Daesh is seemingly attempting to build a system of governance that is both administrative and service-oriented, aimed at providing its citizens with religious guidance, security, education and healthcare, along with infrastructural projects and a judiciary system.[20] The provision of such services is a key legitimising factor for *daesh* and further challenges the existence and legitimacy of traditional states in the region, even though the performances and durability of such services in the long term is hard to assess.[21] While the immediate provision of electricity and aid cannot compensate for the lack of clear institutions or a durable economy, *daesh's* model of governance is perhaps one of the organization's greatest strengths.

The majority of Middle Eastern states are therefore responding to *daesh* both militarily and strategically, with most of these reactions based on the desire to preserving borders and reinstating lost territories. While the Saudi response shares similarities with Riyadh's previous response to the challenge posed by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen,[22] namely, to build a 600 kilometre fence along with border with Iraq,[23] Egypt has created a 13km long buffer zone on the Rafah border in the Sinai desert clearly pursuing a similar aim.[24] Despite the ideological similarities between Saudi Arabia and *daesh* (discussed in more detail below), the rivalry between the two is heated and, as Bruce Ridel and Bilal Saab note, is over the biggest stakes of them all: control of Mecca and Medina.[25] Preserving territorial integrity appears to be taking priority over ensuring

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[16] Why border lines drawn with a ruler in WWI still rock the Middle East (BBC, 14.12.13), available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25299553

[17] Such as Egypt under Nasser's Pan-Arabism, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

[18] Such as in the case of Assad's minority rule in Syria, Egypt after the attack in the Sinai desert and chaos spilling over from the Libya borders, sectarian politics in Iraq.

[19] Caris, C., Reynolds, S., 'ISIS Governance in Syria', in Middle East Security Report 22 (Institute for the Study of War, 2014), p. 4

[20] Ibid., p. 14

[21] Ibid., p. 4

[22] Saudi Arabia builds giant Yemen border fence (BBC, 9.04.13), available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22086231

[23] Richard Spencer, Revealed: Saudi Arabia's 'Great Wall' to keep out Isil (The Telegraph, 14.01.15), available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudiarabia/11344116/Revealed-Saudi-Arabias-Great-Wall-to-keep-out-Isil.html

[24] Demolition of Rafah continues in 2nd phase of Gaza buffer zone (Daily News Egypt, 24.01.15), available at: http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2015/01/24/demolition-rafah-continues-2nd-phase-gaza-buffer-zone/

[25] Bruce Ridel, and Bilal Y. Saab, 'Al Qaeda's Third Front: Saudi Arabia', The Washington Quarterly, Vol. 31, No.2, (2008), p33

human security and that basic needs of all residing in the state are met.[26] Failure to ensure this could have severe repercussions, one of which could be the further legitimization of *daesh* by those whose needs are not met.

Military responses

Even though numerous actors[27] in the region are confronting *daesh* militarily, they seem to be doing so independently, as the Arab League is once more deeply divided and struggling to agree on a common line of action. The unresolved civil war in Syria represents one of the main sources of division within the league, whose members are united in fury but divided in strategy and seemingly only come together to voice their lack of faith in the US-led military coalition.[28]This lack of consensus is not unprecedented in the League's history, but a potential common strategy endorsed by mostly Sunni countries would be hugely symbolic and beneficial in dismantling *daesh* and would also be perceived as more legitimate than the US-led intervention by those in the region. At this point in time however, independent responses seem to dominate the regional geopolitics.

Iran and their ally, Hizballah, have been present in Syria since the early stages of the civil war,[29] refusing any degree of cooperation with the US, aiding the Assad's regime and more recently Iraq, where they are alleged to be training Iraqi forces.[30] Their direct involvement comes with drastic implications on both sides. Hizballah's presence is exacerbating sectarian tensions in Lebanon, whose Sunni population perceive that the country's army should play a more prominent role than the Party of God.[31] Iran's involvement appears to be in line with the aforementioned Karbala Narrative, but the continuous opposition to the US and the military training of Shi'a troops in Iraq seems to fit a national interest that is more geopolitical than religious.[32]

Despite lacking cooperation and coordination, regional responses to *daesh* seem to be increasingly Pan-Arab in nature, with states seemingly seeking alliances that transcend decades long sectarian divisions in order to preserve their own territories. One prominent example involves Egypt, while trying to strengthen its relations with Saudi Arabia also reaching out to Iran and Hizballah, creating dynamics that would have been inconceivable before the past summer.[33] Al Sisi is seemingly strengthening his regional influence by asking for an Arab League mandate authorizing military intervention against *daesh* targets in Libya, again underlining the Pan Arab nature of such military strategies. Similarly, while both part of the Operation Inherent Resolve, Lebanon and Jordan are coordinating their military strategies to improve efficiency.[34] However, while Lebanon's sectarian divide is becoming increasingly prominent,[35] popular discontent is escalating in Jordan over the country's alliance with the US, and the public's general reticence to be targeting fellow Muslims and Arabs abroad.[36]

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[26] This includes non-citizens, internally displaced peoples and refugees.
[27] Non-state actors such as Hizballah and Kurdish militias, and states such as Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, and Jordan.
[28] Arab League Condemns Hezbollah's Intervention in Syria, Nasrallah Criticism of Bahrain (Alakhbar English, 16.01.15), available at: http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/23245
[29] Sullivan, M., 'Hezbollah in Syria', in Middle East Security Report 19 (Institute for the Study of War), April 2014, pp. 11-14
[30] Special Report: How Iran's Military Chiefs Operate in Iraq (Reuters, 24.02.15), available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/24/us-mideast-crisis-committee-specialrepor-idUSKBN0LS0VD20150224
[31] Hezbollah's War against Daesh (Foreign Policy Blogs, 31.08.14), available at: http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2014/08/31/hezbollahs-war-against-daesh/
[32] Iran vs ISIS, stubborn imperial designs (OpenDemocracy, 29.12.14), available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/hazem-saghieh/iran-vs-isis-stubborn-imperial-designs
[33] The Sisi Doctrine (Foreign Policy, 13.08.14), available at: **http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/13/the-sisi-doctrine/**
[34] Militants' Killing of Jordanian Pilot Unites the Arab World (The New York Times, 04.02.15), available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/05/world/middleeast/arab-world-unites-in-anger-after-burning-of-jordanian-pilot.html
[35] Syrian Refugees, Sectarian Tensions Endanger Lebanon: UN (Reuters: 14.09.14), available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/14/us-syria-crisis-lebanon-un-idUSKBN0FJ1RJ20140714
[36] Jordanian opposition to fight against Islamic State grows more vocal (The Wall Street Journal, 02.02.15), available at: http://www.wsj.com/articles/jordanian-opposition-to-fight-against-islamic-state-grows-more-vocal-1422917314

Yet, in embarking on military action, regimes across the region are using violence as a means of reasserting sovereignty, both regionally and domestically. Indeed, Al Sisi's response to declarations of support to *daesh* from groups in Libya has been to seek approval from the UN and Arab League for military action, evoking memories of Gamal Abdl Nasser leading drives for Arab unity in the 1950s and 1960s. Historically, in the face of a growing Pan – Arab threat, Saudi Arabia used notions of Pan – Islamism as a way of countering the growing calls for Arab unity. However, with the rise of *daesh*, referring to Pan Islamism as a geopolitical counter to Egyptian led Pan Arabism appears problematic.

Further adding to the complex regional dynamics is the role of the US as the leading actor of the military coalition enacting Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq. The Arab League's general distrust towards the US-led military intervention is shared by many, as the American presence is seen as yet another manifestation of external intervention and colonial heritage in the region. Moreover, the extent to which American presence aided the creation of *daesh* in Camp Bucca (the US military detention facility that housed both Islamist and ex-Ba'athist prisoners thereby facilitating their interactions) in 2003 is also a source of contention and discontent.[37]

While ideas of a common enemy appear to explain Egyptian, Lebanese and Jordanian roles in the coalition, along with Iran's willingness to open up to long-standing enemy in Egypt, the picture is complicated by the actions of non-state actors such as Hizballah. However, what seems to be emerging from the various strategies playing out in the region is the Arab states' commitment to the preservation of territoriality as a source of sovereignty, with a focus upon the pursuit of singular national interests rather than on the search for a communal strategy. Yet with Israel seemingly embarking on military action in Syria[38] and Iran's continued presence in both Syria and Iraq and Saudi Arabia's legacy of trepidation to Egyptian hegemony in the Middle East, the idea of Pan Arabism as a response to *daesh* appears deeply problematic.

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[37] Isis: the inside story (The Guardian, 11.12.14), available at: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story
[38] Israeli jets strike back after Syria's Golan attack: Israeli army (Reuters, 28.01.15), available from: http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/28/us-israel-syria-idUSKBN0L10E720150128