

Black Flags on the Horizon:  
Reconceptualizing Abnormality In the Middle East

by

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*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Alden D. Glass has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Politics.

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## I. Introduction

*“We promise you car bombs and explosives. Today, we’ve declared the Caliphate. I swear to God we will divide America in two, and we’ll destroy the enemies of the religion, all of them, all who fought the Islamic State. The Caliphate will remain until the end of the world.”<sup>1</sup>*

It was with fire in his eyes and no hint of hesitation in his speech, that a young boy, no older than 12, stared into the camera and delivered the above promise. Speaking shortly after fighters from the Islamic State (I.S.)<sup>2</sup> overran the American equipped and trained Iraqi Security forces to claim the city of Mosul, the words of the young boy were far from empty bravado. In a massive military campaign, the Islamic State conquered huge swaths of Syria and Iraq and declared the resurrection of the Caliphate. Rising like a ghost from the age of crusades and inquisitions, the Islamic State positioned itself as the refutation of Western progress. As the group released graphic videos of decapitations and impassioned defenses for sexual slavery, the international community was at a loss for words. In December of 2014, Major General Michael Nagata, a Spec Ops commander for the U.S. military admitted, “We have not defeated the idea [of I.S.]. We do not even understand the idea.”<sup>3</sup>

It is the surprise, shock, and disbelief of the international community that drives this project. In the modern world, with all of its technology, science, and knowledge, how could a group that burns, stones, and decapitates its prisoners find so much success? I aim

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<sup>1</sup> “The Islamic State (Full Length).” *VICE News*, 26 Dec. 2014.

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to use “The Islamic State,” rather than “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham/Levant (ISIS/ISIL),” for two main reasons. First, this is how the group has referred to itself since the declaration of the Caliphate in June of 2014. Second, with the military successes of the U.S. coalition, I.S. territory has dramatically shrunk in the Levant, while groups in Yemen, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, and Southeast Asia have pledged loyalty. The group has expanded beyond its original purview and, therefore, the broader Islamic State is a more accurate reflection of the group’s aspirations and capabilities.

<sup>3</sup> Bunzel, Cole. *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*. Brookings Institution, (2016), 4.

to examine how political science responds to anomaly within the specific context of the Middle East, through a comparison between the Islamic State and Gamal Abdel Nasser's United Arab Republic (U.A.R.). A comparison between the two is not only peculiar, but likely offensive to the many people who view Nasser as a heroic figure in the anti-colonial and non-alignment movements and the Islamic State as evil incarnate. Yet, it is precisely the peculiarity of this comparison that makes it worthwhile. For following the conventional wisdom of political science will only lead to more confusion and poor policy.

From the Suez Crisis of 1956 to the invasions of Iraq in 1990 and 2003 to the sustained bombing campaign against the Islamic State today, abnormality in the Middle East has been met with violence. As a quick glance at any major news source will tell you, the Middle East has gone from crisis to crisis and conflict to conflict. A new approach is needed. By comparing how scholars discussed both Nasser's U.A.R. and Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic State, I aim to demonstrate the shortcomings of political science's current approach to understanding peculiarity in the Middle East. The unorthodoxy, and perhaps controversy of this comparison allows for the subversion of dominant narratives and a search for what Thomas Kuhn labels a "paradigm shift," or a radical reimagining of the methodologies and paradigms of our traditional political analysis.

I argue that Nasser and al-Baghdadi's political projects stand as anomalies and outliers to the field of Political Science precisely due to their anti-colonial natures. When confronted by this peculiarity, many political scientists attempt to find explanation through various forms of what Mahmood Mamdani has termed "Culture Talk." Culture

talk “assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and then it explains politics as a consequence of that essence.”<sup>4</sup> However, culture talk only serves to further obscure political motivation and agency by refusing to acknowledge and question the base assumptions that cultures are separate entities with innate characteristics. Culture talk limits political imagination and facilitates the portrayal of violence as the only viable solution to political conflict.

Instead, I argue that by considering the theories of postcolonial scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, and Timothy Mitchell, we can displace the abnormal from analysis of political actors in the Middle East. Through a historically and geographically localized analysis of Nasser and al-Baghdadi’s political projects, I aim to position the U.A.R. and I.S. as political actors with concrete goals and political, rather than cultural, motivations. The uneven adoption of Western political formations should be viewed not as an example of cultural inadequacy or an opposition to modernity, but, rather, as a strategy to displace colonialism from the region and to institute local political autonomy.

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<sup>4</sup> Mamdani, Mahmood. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*. Harmony, (2005), 17.

## II. A King, A President, and a Caliph

*“Marriage is like the Middle East, isn’t it? There’s no solution.”<sup>5</sup>*  
-Willy Russell

How do we approach abnormality? Western society is increasingly concerned with making sense of modern society through statistics, science, and experts. This insatiable quest for definitive knowledge has brought the world into increasingly closer contact as *terra incognita* has been explored, conquered, subdued, and integrated into modernity by colonialism, imperialism, and modern capitalism. The result is a world posited to be understandable and analyzable. When a new discovery is made it is catalogued into textbooks and given a name. When violence erupts in a forgotten corner of the world, experts are pulled out of the woodwork and given a chance to explain why normal programming has been interrupted.

Despite the claims of natural and political scientists alike, the world refuses simple categorization. No amount of statistical modeling, intensive polling, or political commentary can truly promise certainty or objective truth. There are few regions of the world that prove the truth of this impotence of modern political science more than the Middle East.

In 1952, then Lieutenant Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser led the Free Officers, a group of Egyptian military officers, to oust Egypt’s King Farouk and establish a Republic. As Vijay Prashad notes, the Free Officers “represented all major strains of Egyptian political life” ranging from members of the nationalist Wafd Party to the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>6</sup> The regime of King Farouk, with his “diet of French cuisine and

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<sup>5</sup> Russell, Willy. *Shirley Valentine*. Samuel French, (1989), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Prashad, Vijay. *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*. The New Press, (2008), 51.

Nubian concubines,” was widely regarded in Egypt as being weak and beholden to the British.<sup>7</sup> Douglas Little notes that “the key sectors of the economy-- railroads, banks, and public utilities-- were dominated by British firms,” and in the agricultural realm, “two-thirds of the arable land was owned by a few thousand wealthy pashas and tended by several million landless fellahin.”<sup>8</sup> The Free Officers grew disillusioned with the Monarchy as the military was humiliated abroad and used to quell domestic discontent. In 1942, the Egyptian military was helpless as “British tanks forced King Farouk at gunpoint to replace his Nazi-sympathetic cabinet” with one more beholden to the Allies’ interests.<sup>9</sup> When conflict with the Israelis loomed in 1948, in spite of his Generals’ calls for caution, Farouk sent the Egyptian military, equipped with “defunct stockpiles from both world wars” into a catastrophic and humiliating failure.<sup>10</sup> In the wake of these humiliations, Nasser led a bloodless coup and sent Farouk into exile. Writing to a Western audience in *Foreign Affairs*, Nasser explained, “This revolution, it will be understood, has been markedly bloodless in character because it is in essence the expression of a sentiment long suppressed but harbored in the heart of the nation.”<sup>11</sup>

When the head of Syria’s Ba’ath revolutionary command council, Abdel Hamid al-Sarraj, approached Nasser with hopes of a political union six years later, Nasser saw an opportunity to cement himself as the “true leader of the Arab world.”<sup>12</sup> After the union was finalized in February of 1958, Nasser found himself the ruler of Egypt and Syria while still playing the middle line between the Soviet and American camps of the Cold

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<sup>7</sup> Little, Douglas. *American Orientalism*. Univ of North Carolina Press, (2008), 161.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>9</sup> “Militarism and Its Discontents.” *The Power Triangle*, by Hazem Kandil, Oxford Scholarship Online, (2016), 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Nasser, Gamal Abdel. "The Egyptian Revolution." *Foreign Affairs* 33.2 (1955), 203.

<sup>12</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 182.

War. The formation of the United Arab Republic led to significant confusion in scholarly circles. Columbia University's Charles Issawi noted that the merger was a "great surprise to all observers of Middle Eastern developments."<sup>13</sup> Writing for *International Affairs*, Nevill Barbour similarly admitted to having "little idea of the relations" between Syria and Egypt after the proclamation of the U.A.R.<sup>14</sup> Kerr, in his history *The Arab Civil War*, poses a question that hits at the foundation of the confusion over the crowning achievement of the pan-Arab movement. He writes, "Why the idea of unity is so strong among Arabs-- so much more than among Latin Americans, for instance, or the English-speaking nations-- is a mystery that neither Arab nor western historians have satisfactorily explained."<sup>15</sup>

While the context of modern Iraq and Syria is drastically different than 1950s Egypt, the answer to Kerr's question still proves to be elusive for political leaders and commentators alike with the emergence of the Islamic State. When American President Donald Trump awarded former President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton the "most valuable player award" for the founding of the Islamic State he was met with widespread derision by the American press.<sup>16</sup> Clinton's policy advisor Jake Sullivan declared Trump was "trash-talking the United States" and that his comments were reflective of Trump's "unprecedented lack of knowledge"<sup>17</sup>. Yet, while Trump's statements lacked nuance and historical context, there is an undeniably American footprint in the creation and rise of ISIS. The Islamic State is the aggregate result of

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<sup>13</sup> Issawi, Charles. "The United Arab Republic." *Current History* 36.210 (1959), 65.

<sup>14</sup> Barbour, Nevill. "Impressions of the United Arab Republic." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 36.1 (1960), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Kerr, Malcolm H. *The Arab Cold War*. Ed. 2. Oxford University Press, (1967), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Kopan, Tal. "Donald Trump: I Meant That Obama Founded ISIS, Literally." *CNN*, Cable News Network, (12 Aug. 2016).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

centuries of Western Imperialism in the Middle East, the increasing salience of Islamism as a political force in the Middle East, and the economic and political devastation left across the region in the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In the words of al-Qaeda theorist Abu Musab al-Suri, “The American occupation of Iraq... almost single-handedly rescued the jihadi movement” from its near destruction during the American invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> While the invasion of Afghanistan targeted al-Qaeda training camps and safe houses, as well as the Taliban, a state that was actually sheltering Osama Bin Laden’s fighters, the American invasion of Iraq removed a staunchly anti-Islamist dictator and threatened the Sunni minority within Iraq. As Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger note, “terrorism within Iraq’s borders rose precipitously. There were 78 terrorist attacks in the first twelve months following the U.S. invasion; in the second twelve months this number nearly quadrupled to 302 attacks.”<sup>19</sup> Despite President George W. Bush’s promise that the United States came to Iraq “with respect for its citizens, for their great civilisation and for the religious faiths they practice”, the American invasion devastated the Iraqi nation.<sup>20</sup> Quickly after toppling the Baath Regime in Baghdad, the American led Coalition Provisional Authority released a number of orders to institute a policy known as de-Baathification. Over 100,000 Baathists were immediately removed from political and military positions leaving Iraq with no police force, military, or political bureaucracy, apart from the American led coalition which had not realized it had transitioned from a

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<sup>18</sup> Wright, Lawrence. “The Master Plan.” *The New Yorker*, (11 Sep. 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Stern, Jessica, and John M. Berger. *ISIS: The State of Terror*. Harper Collins, (2015), 18.

<sup>20</sup> “Full Text: George Bush's Address on the Start of War.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 20 Mar. 2003

liberatory force to an occupying one. The weapons and supplies of the Iraqi military were left unsupervised and were quickly stolen by militant groups across the country.

The rise of I.S., and armed resistance more broadly within Iraq, is personified by its forefather, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi was a Jordanian with a history of petty crime who turned to a particularly violent form of Salafism after meeting Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi while fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan in the late 1980s. Named after the “pious predecessors,” or the first followers of the Prophet Muhammad, Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam which draws on the founding spirit of the original Islamic community. While Salafism takes many forms worldwide, many of which are non-violent and completely opposed to state power, Zarqawi’s, and subsequently the Islamic State’s, particular brand of Salafism claims to deny all human interpretation and innovation of religious law. By constantly quoting Prophetic example and Quranic verse, I.S. positions all of its actions as justified not by their merits, but rather by their legality.

The American Invasion of Iraq gave Zarqawi the perfect mix of chaos and violence to make his move. After a high profile suicide bombing on the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad and the bombing of a Shiite Mosque which killed 125 people, Zarqawi declared nominal allegiance to Bin Laden and renamed his organization al-Qaeda in Iraq (A.Q.I.). With official backing from Bin Laden, Zarqawi “led a murderous campaign unmatched in the history of al-Qaeda” where he routinely ignored al-Qaeda central command and continued to fan the flames of sectarian conflict by attacking Shi’a Muslims indiscriminately across Iraq.<sup>21</sup> One of the biggest distinctions between Zarqawi’s A.Q.I. and other Salafist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda

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<sup>21</sup> Wright, “The Master Plan.”

was their understanding of the concept of Takfir. While most Salafis agree that a true Muslim life can only be lived through emulation of the first generation of Muslims, there is disagreement over how this ought to come to being. Takfir is a highly contested term that most commonly refers to the act of declaring another Muslim a non-believer, and therefore justifying violence against them. Egyptian political theorist and Muslim Brotherhood member Sayyid Qutb is often regarded as providing the intellectual foundation for this contemporary understandings of takfir. In his work, *In the Shade of the Quran*, Qutb argues that Islam needs to strike “hard against political regimes that rule over people according to laws other than that of God... and prevent them from listening to the message of Islam.”<sup>22</sup> According to this understanding of Islam, Qutb argues that Muslims must “realize the inevitability of jihad, or striving for God’s cause, taking a military form in addition to its advocacy form.”<sup>23</sup> Zarqawi’s controversial position on takfir led to his break with al-Qaeda, as well as widespread condemnation from around Islamic world. While Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. airstrike in June of 2006, A.Q.I. managed to survive and reformed by merging with other Sunni jihadist groups as the Islamic State of Iraq (I.S.I.).

I.S.I. quickly ran into existential problems as the U.S. Military began to recognize their missteps and reorganized their approach with the twin policies of a surge of additional soldiers and the so-called Sunni Awakening. By focusing on winning the loyalty of Sunni tribal leaders, the American military took away potential recruits from I.S.I. by giving Sunni Iraqis an avenue for participation in the Iraqi state. However, the success proved to be short lived, as the day the last American troops were pulled out of

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<sup>22</sup> Euben, Roxanne L., and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds. *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*. Princeton University Press, (2009), 149.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Iraq, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki arrested his Sunni Vice President Tariq Hashimi on terrorism charges.<sup>24</sup> Maliki continued to further isolate Sunnis from the Iraqi state by removing Sunni cabinet members and sending Shi'a militias to crackdown on Sunni protestors across the country. Zarqawi may have died, but the sectarian civil war he ignited continued to blaze while Maliki stoked the flames.

After four years of defeat and humiliation, I.S.I. began its comeback amidst popular Sunni discontent with the Shi'a dominated central Iraqi state. A mysterious new leader with the *nom de guerre* Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emerged and revitalized I.S.I. In a biography distributed by the Islamic State, al-Baghdadi is described as “a man from a religious family” who studied at the Islamic University in Baghdad.<sup>25</sup> When the U.S. invaded in 2003, al-Baghdadi founded an insurgent group known as the Army of the Sunni People Group and began to fight against the Americans in Samarra, Diyala, and al-Baghdad until he was captured in late 2004 or early 2005.<sup>26</sup> Al-Baghdadi was imprisoned at Camp Bucca and quickly became involved in the massive recruitment process occurring through U.S. military prisons. Iraq War Veteran Andrew Thompson wrote in an Op-Ed for the New York Times,

At Camp Bucca, the extremists forced moderate detainees to listen to clerics who advocated jihad. The majority of prisoners were illiterate, so they were particularly susceptible. Prisoners frequently refused medical attention and vocational training for fear of breaking religious rules. The prisons became virtual terrorist universities: The hardened radicals were the professors, the other detainees were the students, and the prison authorities played the role of absent custodian.<sup>27</sup>

Al-Baghdadi was released after the U.S. Military began a campaign to release a number of the over 100,000 Iraqis who passed through its major military prisons during

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<sup>24</sup> Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> “A Biography of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.” *Insite On Terrorism*, 12 Aug. 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, Andrew, and Jeremi Suri. “How America Helped ISIS.” *The New York Times*, 1 Oct. 2014.

the occupation.<sup>28</sup> With his freedom secured, Baghdadi joined I.S.I. and quickly rose up the ranks. After a U.S. airstrike killed the top leadership in 2010, Baghdadi was chosen as a leader by the group's Shura Council due to his "religious authority and track record of strategic success."<sup>29</sup> While in Camp Bucca, al-Baghdadi had made a number of important allies amongst former Ba'ath intelligence officers and Sunni Jihadists. Al-Baghdadi called upon these relationships formed in prison and surrounded the upper leadership of I.S.I. with men he met in prison. According to Richard Barrett of the Soufan Group, a think-tank which provides strategic security intelligence to state actors, the Ba'athists "brought military and organizational skills and a network of experienced bureaucrats that AQI and then ISI lacked."<sup>30</sup> While on its face, the alliance between radical Salafist militants and secular Ba'athists may seem unlikely, Barrett argues the two movements had more in common than met the eye. He writes, "Both the salafist/takfiri approach and the theory of Ba'athism share a vision of a new beginning through a return to the past."<sup>31</sup> While Ba'athism's insistence on a secular state is certainly at odds with al-Baghdadi's religious fundamentalism, "the development of Islam was seen by Ba'athist theoreticians as evidence of the greatness of Arab culture and of the intellectual vitality of its people."<sup>32</sup>

With the conquest of Fallujah and Mosul in 2014, al-Baghdadi renounced ties with al-Qaeda and formally announced the restoration of the Caliphate. The rapid military expansion made by the newly minted Islamic State in 2014 left political scientists and American government officials scrambling to find an explanation. In an

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Barrett, Richard. "The Islamic State." *The Soufan Group* (Nov. 2014), 19.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 18.

article for *The Atlantic*, Graeme Wood attempted to clear up confusion about I.S. by describing it as the next stage of jihadist evolution from al-Qaeda and as a group dedicated to “returning civilization to a seventh-century legal environment, and ultimately to bring... about the apocalypse.”<sup>33</sup> For Wood, I.S. was a cult-like religious movement whose goals and motivations could only be understood through an understanding of their apocalyptic propaganda. Perhaps more tellingly, in early 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama responded to comments about the Islamic State conquering the city of Fallujah in Iraq by referring to IS as the “jayvee team” to al-Qaeda’s Los Angeles Lakers.<sup>34</sup> When the U.S. President, backed by the one of the most sophisticated and extensive surveillance apparatuses in history, was so comprehensively mistaken about the capabilities and ideologies of I.S., it is clear that something novel is occurring in world affairs.

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<sup>33</sup> Wood, Graeme. "What ISIS Really Wants." *The Atlantic* 315.2 (2015).

<sup>34</sup> Remnick, David. “On and Off the Road with Barack Obama.” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 27 Jan. 2014.

### III. Preserving Normality in an Abnormal World

*“all the traditional divisions which imperialism tried to impose on the continent to rend it apart... have all collapsed and were swept away by the genuine African reality. There remains but one language on African land.. The language of destiny, no matter what the method of expression.”*<sup>35</sup>

- Gamal Abdel Nasser, May 24th, 1963

The confusion, disagreement, and surprise demonstrated in the face of the peculiarity of the Middle Eastern state in the above examples is important to emphasize. With frequent regime changes, civil wars, Islamic revolutions, and pan-Arab mergers, the Middle East stands apart from many political scientists' expectations. In response to this break from expectations, many scholars resort to using what Mahmood Mamdani has labeled “culture talk”. At a base understanding, culture talk, or culturalism, holds that politics can be explained through the discussion of characteristics that are considered innate to certain cultures. Raphael Patai's book *The Arab Mind* serves as an apt example for the culturalist argument in the Middle East. The back cover of Patai's book offers to explain “how despite the wealth and power brought to the Arab world by... oil, these rich nations remain largely illiterate, at war with each other, and facing the challenge... of digesting the overwhelming influx of Western skills and knowledge.”<sup>36</sup> Patai proceeds to demonstrate how the upbringing of Arab children and the Arabic language itself helps propagate “the Bedouin element in the Arab personality,” which consists of “kinship, loyalty, bravery, manliness, aversion to physical work, and a great emphasis on honor.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Nasser, Gamal Abdel. *On the Road to African Unity*. Portland State University, (1966), 20.

<sup>36</sup> Patai, Raphael. *The Arab Mind*. Macmillan Publishing Company, (1983), Back Cover.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

For Patai, failures of Arab states to adapt to Western modernity ought to be traced to these cultural characteristics.

Scholars similarly turned to culture talk to help explain the surprise of the United Arab Republic. Issawi posited the union was the result of Syria's need for a "bigger and stronger Arab brother."<sup>38</sup> Barbour offered a similar suggestion. Syria was a weak state, and the merger with Egypt was the answer to its weakness. As the "birthplace of the idea of Arab Unity", Syria chose to join with Egypt rather than risking becoming a pawn of the Soviets.<sup>39</sup> Barbour goes farther however, and argues that the prosperity in the metro centers of the U.A.R. "is in part the result of British administration in the past" and the proximity they have to "the British way of life."<sup>40</sup> The U.A.R.'s successes were thus largely the result of British colonialism. In Barbour's perspective, the admirable aspects of the U.A.R. were not the product of the local leaders, but rather the result of British culture slowly rubbing off on their colonial subjects' regimes which were "more suitable to the Middle Ages."<sup>41</sup>

In the half century since the U.A.R. collapsed, culturalist arguments have developed and evolved as well. For Mamdani, culture talk found its most "durable version" through a dichotomy of good and bad Muslims supported by Bernard Lewis and his book *What Went Wrong?*.<sup>42</sup> A good Muslim is one who is "modern, secular, and Westernized" while bad Muslims are "doctrinal, antimodern, and virulent."<sup>43</sup> It is important to recognize this variant of culturalism considering that it has become the

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<sup>38</sup> Issawi, "The United Arab Republic.", 65.

<sup>39</sup> Barbour, "Impressions of the United Arab Republic.", 21.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 24.

driving force of American foreign policy in the Middle East from President Bush's administration to the present day. Speaking in Cairo in 2009, President Obama assured the audience that "America is not... at war with Islam" but added that the U.S. will "relentlessly confront violent extremists who pose a grave threat to our security."<sup>44</sup> A RAND Corporation policy report titled "Building Moderate Muslim Networks" lays out the need to provide "an external catalyst" to moderate Muslims in the fight against Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>45</sup> Rather than merely identifying good and bad Muslims, RAND argues through the report that "there is no liberal Muslim movement" and it is in the interests of both the U.S. and the region to create one.<sup>46</sup>

In an attempt to move beyond the racial science that is foundational to culture talk, many political scientists have offered up the failed state thesis to explain the peculiarity of the Middle Eastern state. However, the failed state thesis's mix of quantitative analysis and supposedly objective observation merely obscures the same underlying assumptions and failures of culturalism. Robert Rotberg argues that understanding state failure is vitally important because "national states constitute the building blocks of legitimate world order [and] the violent disintegration of selected... states threaten[s] the very foundation of that system."<sup>47</sup> For Rotberg, state failure occurs when a state's "performance" in providing "a decentralized method of delivering political goods" to its citizens becomes subpar.<sup>48</sup> In his book *Islam and Politics*, political scientist Peter Mandaville devotes an entire chapter to examining how Islamism functions within

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<sup>44</sup> "Text: Obama's Speech in Cairo." *The New York Times*, 4 June 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Rabasa, Angel. *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*. Vol. 574. RAND Corporation, (2007), iii.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Rotberg, Robert I., *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*. Brookings Institution Press, (2004), 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

the context of a failed state. While in states such as Egypt, neoliberal reforms have resulted in the retreat of the state from providing social services, a failed state is distinguished by a complete collapse of all functions. Mandaville writes, “[in a failed state] the state is missing altogether, or is so weak as to be wholly absent from people’s considerations regarding alternative sources of welfare or political identity.”<sup>49</sup> In these contexts, “political sovereignty and national legitimacy” are “up for grabs”, and Islamism must then rise to the challenge of maintaining popular support based not solely upon religious identity but political ability to rule.

Within conventional political science, Islamic terrorism is often discussed as a product of state failure. Under Mandaville and Rotberg’s understanding of failed states, the Islamic State ought to be viewed as a response to the failures of the Iraqi and Syrian states to provide political goods to their citizens. The solution to the threat I.S. poses to the global system is then to improve the “performance” of the Iraqi and Syrian states. In a review of the literature written about I.S., Riaz Hassan concurred, writing, “The rise of ISIS, therefore, is not all about religion, militancy and territorial conquests but largely due to the failure of ethnic reconciliation and politics in Iraq.”<sup>50</sup> The failures of the Iraqi state to manage its diverse population explains I.S.’s rise rather than any particular strengths or capabilities of the group themselves. When pressed by *The New Yorker* to explain the Islamic State, President Obama similarly responded by blaming the schism between Sunnis and Shias on “failed states that are just dysfunctional, and various warlords and thugs and criminals [that] are trying to gain leverage or a foothold so they

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<sup>49</sup> Mandaville, Peter. *Islam and Politics*. Routledge, (2014), 271.

<sup>50</sup> Hassan, Riaz. "ISIS and the Caliphate." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51.4 (2016), 761.

can control resources, populations, [and] territory.”<sup>51</sup> The failed state thesis is also evident in Issawi and Barbour’s discussion of the formation of the U.A.R. It is due to the failures of Syrian political and economic policies that the union with Egypt becomes an economically advantageous arrangement. Had the Syrian state been a more effective actor, the union with Egypt would not have been needed.

The failed state thesis should be seen as an iteration of the good/bad Muslim distinction drawn out above by Mamdani. Good states are the ones that meet standards defined along the Western model, while deviance leads to a label of failure. Theorist Sophia Dingli argues that the failed state thesis “presupposes the existence of an ideal ‘state’ paradigm, clearly inspired by the European state experience” which is then used as the benchmark to judge whether or not a state is failing.<sup>52</sup> The political goods discussed by Rotberg are near synonymous with Western, liberal democracy. For a state to “graduate” from failed state to weak state, or weak to strong, it must move closer to the model provided by states like the U.S. or Germany.<sup>53</sup> The limitation inherent within failed state theory is an inability to recognize the failures of Western political formations to adapt to other contexts. The failed state thesis also is unable to recognize how Western political formations succeeded *because* of the failure of the non-Western world. The strengths that Rotberg notes were developed and solidified through colonial and imperial domination of the non-Western world. By refusing to question the viability of the model, the solutions for correcting state failure derived from Mandaville and Rotberg’s arguments may only exacerbate the hierarchies that originated the state’s “failure”.

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<sup>51</sup> Remnick, “On and Off the Road”.

<sup>52</sup> Dingli, Sophia. "Is the Failed State Thesis Analytically Useful? The Case of Yemen." *Politics* 33.2 (2013), 93.

<sup>53</sup> Rotberg, *State Failure*, 10.

There is an important distinction that ought to be drawn between the study of culture and the culturalism outlined above. It is impossible to deny that culture plays a massive role in political life and its study opens up new avenues for political imagination. Edward Said, in his book *Culture and Imperialism*, describes culture as a “battleground on which causes expose themselves to the light of day and contend with one another.”<sup>54</sup> The idea of culture as a battleground has also proved fruitful for political analysis as demonstrated by theorist Stuart Hall. For Hall, the study of popular culture is essential because it highlights the larger power dynamics occurring across society. Hall points to the “continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganise and reorganise popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms.”<sup>55</sup> Under Hall’s framework, culture can be viewed as an important object of analysis to see how power relations are contested in society.

As opposed to culturalism, this approach views politics as being influenced and contested within cultural objects such as literature, sport, film, music, and other artistic forms. When politics are reduced to a simple manifestation of innate cultural characteristics, these avenues are shut down. Culturalism can be, in Mamdani’s words, “productive of fear and preemptive police or military actions.”<sup>56</sup> Tim Jacoby extends Mamdani’s argument to include contemporary discussions of the Islamic State and argues that culturalism allows the West to position “the violence of the ‘bad’ Muslim [as] not driven by a rational engagement with the policies and presence of the West,” and

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<sup>54</sup> Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Knopf, (1993), xiii.

<sup>55</sup> Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'". *Popular Culture: A Reader*. Sage, (2005), 67.

<sup>56</sup> Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 18.

therefore, that it “should, instead, be met with force.”<sup>57</sup> As demonstrated by the massive failure of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, military interventions in the Middle East did not lead to the “good” Muslims coming to power, but rather annihilated the political, cultural, and economic foundations of the Iraqi state further pushing the region into conflict and poverty. It is thus culturalism, not culture itself, that this project aims to critique.

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<sup>57</sup> Jacoby, Tim. "Culturalism and the Rise of the Islamic State." *Third World Quarterly* 38.7 (2017), 1668.

## IV. Postcolonial Horizons: A Disciplined Approach to the Abnormal

“The best way to understand the normal is to study the abnormal”<sup>58</sup>

- William James

With the failures of culturalist approaches to adequately address the peculiarity of the Middle Eastern state, how can we better confront outliers in comparative politics? A possible answer lies with adopting a new process of knowledge production. Thomas Kuhn, writing about scientific inquiry, argues that “normal science” often ignores and suppresses novelties which “subvert the existing tradition of scientific practice.”<sup>59</sup> When these problems persist, science must undergo a radical “scientific revolution” in order to make sense of the anomaly. This revolution “is seldom or never just an increment to what is already known,” rather it “requires the reconstruction of prior theory and the re-evaluation of prior fact.”<sup>60</sup> When applied to political science, the Kuhnian approach calls for a re-evaluation of the categories, paradigms, and theories through which comparative politics are analyzed and understood. This provides an opportunity to create a new and alternative political paradigm from the inadequate culturalist and failed state theories that critically engages the various tools and metrics being used for analysis.<sup>61</sup>

In his book *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty provides a concrete example of Kuhnian analysis through his discussion of the Indian peasant. Chakrabarty notes the tension between two characteristics of the Indian peasant. Namely, that the

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<sup>58</sup> Richardson, Robert D. *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*. HMH, (2007), 346.

<sup>59</sup> Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago Press, (2012), 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> I have modeled my application of Kuhn’s discussion of paradigmatic shifts to political science on Sheldon Wolin’s article “Political Theory as a Vocation”.

peasant must “be educated into the citizen”, but, at the same time, “is already a citizen.”<sup>62</sup> By participating in nationalist, and therefore modern, movements, these peasants “did not follow the logic of secular-rational calculations... [in] the modern conception of the political.”<sup>63</sup> Since the peasant was capable of political action without meeting the prerequisites for political participation, the Indian peasant became unintelligible to conventional political science. Chakrabarty reimagines the political nature of the Indian peasant by engaging in a fundamental critique of the methods and theories being used to analyze it. Rather than viewing the Indian peasant as an example of the incomplete adoption of Western secular modernity, Chakrabarty calls for the peasant to be seen as a “real contemporary of colonialism, a fundamental part of the modernity that colonial rule brought to India.”<sup>64</sup>

Just as conventional political science cannot comprehend the political agency of the Indian peasant, so too does the utilization of colonial state formation and nation-building by anti-colonial movements seem paradoxical. Writing about the moment of decolonization, Partha Chatterjee describes how the newly formed states needed to develop their own nationalisms to form coherent political communities out of the various ethnic and racial minorities that found themselves pushed together by the arbitrary boundaries of the colonial world. A vital characteristic of the new national identity was an opposition to colonialism, and it “must therefore reject the immediate political implications of colonialist thought and argue in favor of political possibilities which colonialist thought refuses to admit.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton University Press, (2000), 10.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Zed Books, (1986), 41-42.

While Chatterjee writes about the process of building up the “nation” in the nation-state, his framework helps us understand how the “state” was also developed in the postcolonial moment. The possibilities and capacities of modern state power were too great to be ignored completely by the formerly colonized nations. As Talal Asad writes, “No movement that aspires to more than mere belief or inconsequential talk in public can remain indifferent to state power in a secular world.”<sup>66</sup> The specific institution of the nation-state is necessarily adopted by post-colonial movements because of the “modern nation-state’s enforced claim to constitute legitimate social identities and arenas.”<sup>67</sup> Yet, as Chatterjee argues about the nation, the adoption of the state by anti-colonial movements cannot take the Western state in its entirety. Anti-colonial movements cannot remain solely a negation of colonial forms of power. They must also be “a positive discourse which seeks to replace the structure of colonial power with a new order.”<sup>68</sup>

What Chakrabarty’s peasant and Chatterjee’s post-colonial nation share is a political agency that is difficult to recognize under a Western-centric framework. Both are seen along a teleological spectrum as not ready for political action in the modern age. However, if we take Chakrabarty’s argument that “European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations,” then we can position non-Western political movements, and the citizens that constitute them, not as abnormalities, but as legitimate political actors.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Asad, Talal. "Religion, Nation-State, Secularism." *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe 1789-1999*, 191.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 42.

<sup>69</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16.

It is then important for us to discuss a quick evolution of state theory in order to find a theory that is compatible with Chatterjee's framework about the postcolonial nation. One of the most referenced definitions of the state within political science is Max Weber's claim that the state is "a human community that (successfully) claims *the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory."<sup>70</sup> However, with the widespread privatization of policing, jailing, and national defense in the modern world, Weber's monopoly of violence framework leaves more questions than answers. In the Middle East, the omnipresence of U.S. military power, through bases and drones, stands as a direct refutation of states like Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Saudi Arabia's monopolies of violence. Does this mean these countries are no longer states? Solely defining the state along the capacity for force is an insufficient framework as it omits mention to the numerous private or para-governmental institutions and interests which affect state action, as well as the role external military and diplomatic influence plays across the region.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a number of American and Marxist theorists offered a new way to conceptualize the state, primarily by throwing away the state as a theoretical concept. Often referred to as the Systemist approach, these scholars viewed the state as a weak concept for two primary reasons. Primarily, the state was too vague of a term to be used for productive conversation, and secondly, it omitted important segments of the political process. University of Chicago's David Easton writes, "We can try to understand political life by viewing each of its aspects piecemeal. We can examine the operation of such institutions as political parties, interest groups,

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<sup>70</sup> Weber, Max. *Politics as a Vocation*. Fortress Press, (1965), 2.

government, and voting...By combining the results we can obtain a rough picture of what happens in any self-contained political system.”<sup>71</sup> Within Easton’s framework, the state is replaced by the concept of a political system, where any political decision is the aggregate result of multiple agencies, institutions, and political actors providing inputs into the system.

Another important trajectory of state theory was developed by various Marxist theorists, which, roughly speaking, posited the state as an tool of dominant class interests. Theorist Nicos Poulantzas provides an importantly nuanced version of this view of the state. For Poulantzas, “the State is not created *ex nihilo* by the ruling class, nor is it simply taken over by them... [and] while all the State’s actions are not reducible to political domination, their composition is nevertheless marked by it.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, regardless of state actions that might contradict upper class interests, the creation of the state writes a class based domination into the internal logics of state power.

In her book *States and Social Revolutions*, Theda Skocpol attempts to reassert the state as a useful and productive theoretical concept. Skocpol rejects the Systemist and Marxist views for their inability to acknowledge the subjectivity of the state. She writes, “An assumption that always lies... behind [systems and Marxist theories is] that political structures and struggles can somehow be reduced... to socioeconomic forces and conflicts... [where] the state is viewed as nothing but *an arena*.”<sup>73</sup> Rather than viewing the state as an arena, Skocpol sees the state “as an autonomous structure -- a structure with a logic and interests of its own not necessarily equivalent to, or fused with, the interests of the dominant class in society, or the full set of member groups in the

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<sup>71</sup> Easton, David. "An Approach to the Analysis of Political Systems." *World Politics* 9.3 (1957), 383.

<sup>72</sup> Poulantzas, Nicos. *State, Power, Socialism*. Vol. 29. Verso, (2000), 14.

<sup>73</sup> Skocpol, Theda. *States and Social Revolutions*. Cambridge University Press, (1979), 25.

polity.”<sup>74</sup> Skocpol, while admitting that societal forces and non-state actors influence the state, gives the state a subjectivity based in a “set of administrative, policing, military organizations headed... by an executive authority.”<sup>75</sup>

While Skocpol’s critique of systems and Marxist theories makes a crucial point about the separation between the state’s executive authority and society’s influencing factors, her overall conceptualization of the state is limited by its inability to see beyond the state as a coherent, subjective actor. This critique of Skocpol is well developed by Timothy Mitchell. While theorists like Skocpol see the state as standing “apart from society as a set of original intentions or preferences,” Mitchell argues the lack of unity within the state organizations necessitates re-conceptualization of the state.<sup>76</sup> Rather than arguing over where the dividing line between state and society ought to be placed, Mitchell views the state as an effect of a complex web of “detailed processes of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification, and supervision and surveillance.”<sup>77</sup> The impossibility of separating state and society serves as the focus of Mitchell’s analysis. Channeling Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, Mitchell argues that disciplinary processes of surveillance and organization “create the effect of the state not only as an entity set apart from society, but as a distinct dimension of structure, framework, codification, planning, and intentionality” (95). The state has no intentionality, but is rather the aggregate result of the everyday practices of people.

Mitchell’s state-as-effect framework provides a much more compelling vision of the state in the context of the Middle East than the systemist, Marxist, and statist theories

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>76</sup> Mitchell, Timothy. "The Limits of the State" *American Political Science Review* 85.1 (1991), 88.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 95.

discussed above. This approach accounts for the artificial nature of the state as a construction, rather than a natural phenomenon. In *Colonizing Egypt*, Mitchell writes, disciplinary powers have “important consequences for an understanding of the colonial and modern state” as they allow one to “move beyond the image of power as a system of authoritative commands or policies backed by force that direct and constrain social action.”<sup>78</sup> If viewed through Mitchell’s framework, state power “works not from the outside but from within... and not by restricting individuals and their actions but by producing them.”<sup>79</sup> The aggregate result of this productive power is the construction of the binary that so confused systemists. Mitchell describes the binary as “on the one hand individuals and their activities, on the other an inert structure that somehow stands apart from individual, preexists them, and contains and gives a framework to their lives.”<sup>80</sup>

In *Colonizing Egypt*, Mitchell applies his framework to analyze colonial state formation in 1800s Egypt by examining the specific programs geared at producing the “modern individual, constructed as an isolated, disciplined, receptive, and industrious political subject.”<sup>81</sup> The modern Egyptian state formed as a result of the shift from the sovereign powers of restriction and taxation to the productive powers that focused on penetrating the production of the rural country. The effectiveness of these powers came from “their localised ability to infiltrate, rearrange, and colonise.”<sup>82</sup> While the effectiveness of these technologies to develop populations geared towards capitalist production meant they were a vital tool of the colonial project in the Middle East,

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<sup>78</sup> Mitchell, Timothy. *Colonising Egypt*. Univ of California Press, (1991), xi.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., ix.

Mitchell also urges not to “overstate the coherence” of disciplinary powers.<sup>83</sup> Writing against the subjectivist approach of Skocpol, Mitchell argues that these powers conflict with one another, fail in their goals, and furthermore, can be utilized for counter-hegemonic resistance.

Mitchell’s approach allows for a less Eurocentric application of theory to the diverse manifestations of the state across the world. The state-as-effect framework is much more concerned with power’s process of production rather than the substance of that production. Everything from a liberal democracy, to an Islamist theocracy, to a secular and socialist dictatorship, utilizes these disciplinary powers. With widely ranging structures, institutions, economic organizations, and political ideals, the power of Mitchell’s theory is that all of these forms of political organization can still be recognized and analyzed as states. That is, by focusing on the functioning of power in place of analyzing political structure, Mitchell’s framework is less reliant upon an ideal state paradigm defined upon the Western European experience.

The Islamic State’s engagement of modern state power in their political challenge to the nation-states of the Middle East appears to be paradoxical when understood via conventional political science and state theory. However, when viewed as part of the anti-colonial tradition, the discrepancies between theory and practice caused by the enigma that is the Islamic State become recognizable. Due to the destruction of their pasts, anti-colonial movements are forced by material and pragmatic realities to borrow from the colonizer. The distinctiveness of I.S.’s particular brand of politics ought to be understood

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., xi.

as an appropriation of past national identities for the creation of what Chatterjee identifies as new forms of power.

## V. Nasser and the Anti-Colonial Caliphate

*“Hence, we see that union is a reality, something to strive for, something which we live. Thus we see that the struggle for power, the struggle for life, is consummated and realized only through unity, since unity is only through power and life.”<sup>84</sup>*

- Gamal Abdel Nasser

*“Today you have, by God’s bounty, a state and caliphate that will renew your dignity and strength, that will recover your rights and your sovereignty: a state joining in brotherhood non-Arab and Arab, white and black, easterner and westerner... God has brought their hearts together, and they have become, by God’s grace, brothers loving together in God, standing in one trench, defending one another... Their blood has mixed under one banner and for one purpose...”<sup>85</sup>*

- Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

What would it look like to use this post-colonial lens to analyze state peculiarities in the Middle East? First, it requires a deeper level of historical context to allow for Eurocentric observations and value judgements to be recognized, if not fully put aside. By analyzing the colonial history of the Middle East, contemporary events can be positioned within a larger tradition of anti-colonialism and consequently be better understood. Second, by analyzing how disciplinary powers have been utilized to construct a state by the Islamic State, the goals and ideologies of I.S. can be put into conversation with Nasser’s U.A.R. By placing these seemingly dissimilar Middle Eastern political movements into conversation, I aim to demonstrate how anti-colonial rhetoric serves as a vital political force for both, and consequently highlight the connection between abnormality and non-Western political agency.

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<sup>84</sup> Nasser, Gamal Abdel. “Nasser’s Address on the Egyptian Syrian Federation.” *Current History* (1958), 241.

<sup>85</sup> Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*, 41-42.

In the waning days of the once mighty Ottoman Empire, Sir Henry McMahon, a British diplomat, approached Sharif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca with a proposition. The Ottoman Empire had recently joined the Germans in the First World War, and the British and French were looking for allies in all corners. In August of 1915, McMahon wrote Hussein and insisted, “His Majesty’s Government would welcome the resumption of the Khalifate by an Arab of true race” if the Arabs would declare a revolt on their Turkish masters.<sup>86</sup> With the backing of the British, Hussein, in what became known as the Arab Revolt, quickly liberated Syria and western Arabia from Ottoman control.<sup>87</sup> When Hussein sent his son to the peace negotiations at Versailles, the Arab delegation was expecting to be granted self-determination and the pronouncement of a new Arab caliphate in the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. However, upon arrival, the Arab delegation quickly discovered the fickle nature of American and British promises.

On January 8th, 1918, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson delivered the fourteen points of his programme of world peace. Of particular interest to the Arab delegation in Versailles was point twelve which promised, “other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.”<sup>88</sup> These grand and public promises of national self-determination by American and British leaders were not matched by the private considerations and machinations of the Entente Powers’ leadership. Unbeknownst to Hussein, British diplomat Mark Sykes and his French counterpart Francois Georges-Picot, had signed a secret treaty splitting up the Ottoman empire into British and French

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<sup>86</sup> “Pre-State Israel.” *The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence (July 1915-August 1916)*, Jewish Virtual Library.

<sup>87</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 159.

<sup>88</sup> Wilson, Woodrow. “President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points.” *Avalon Project*, Yale Law School.

zones of influence. The agreement gave the French and British the right to “establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire” with the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>89</sup> American Secretary of State Robert Lansing also urged President Wilson to reconsider self-determination in the Middle East. He warned, “The more I think about the President’s declaration as to the right of ‘self-determination,’ the more convinced I am to the danger of putting such ideas into the minds of certain races.”<sup>90</sup> The need to keep British and French loyalty, as well as sentiments of racial paternalism, meant Wilson’s calls for self-determination were quickly set aside in the Versailles negotiations. The Middle East was carved into British and French Mandates, sponsored by the League of Nations, and hopes for a unified and independent Arab state were denied.

Why begin my analysis with the story of a hundred year old treaty, especially considering that the map drawn up by Sykes and Picot shares few similarities with the final national boundaries drawn up in Versailles? More than anything else, Sykes-Picot represents humiliation, and it is this humiliation that has lingered in the Middle East. As Erez Manela noted, the Egyptian delegation to Versailles “had pinned their hopes on American support for their cause, and the American decision to recognize the [British] protectorate abruptly squashed those hopes, leaving them with a bitter and lingering sense of betrayal.”<sup>91</sup> It is this humiliation and betrayal that resonates so strongly that secularist dictators like Nasser and militants like al-Baghdadi continually reference it. Speaking in 1961 during the U.A.R.’s three year anniversary, Nasser exclaimed, “The Allies, who

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 159-160.

<sup>91</sup> Manela, Erez. "The Wilsonian Moment and the Rise of Anticolonial Nationalism." *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 12.4 (2001), 112.

emerged victorious at the end of the first World War, broke the promises they made... The imperialists do not want us united, to have pride, progress or prosperity... they want to break up the Arab Nation and bring it inside their spheres of influence.”<sup>92</sup> In fact, rather than being the result of any innate characteristic or racial oddity of Arabs, the U.A.R. ought to be viewed as an anti-colonial state. For Nasser, and countless others in the formerly colonized world, the U.A.R. was, at the same time, the refutation of Western colonial ambitions in the Middle East and the reclamation of Arab power and agency

When Nasser declared the formation of the United Arab Republic in 1958, he described it as a “dawn” at the end of a long night that “extended over hundreds of years of non-stop struggle against the tyranny of colonialism.”<sup>93</sup> The union of Syria and Egypt went hand in hand with the promotion of a unity of Arab identity which “goes back to time immemorial.”<sup>94</sup> Moreover, “the history of Cairo... is the history also of Damascus.”<sup>95</sup> By uniting them within the U.A.R., Nasser positioned himself as righting the wrongs committed upon the Arab people in the aftermath of Versailles.

After cementing control of the Egyptian state, Nasser began to reshape Egypt to match his ideology of a pan-Arab and revolutionary socialist state. As Malcolm Kerr notes, the initial ideology of the Free Officers was “against corruption, social oppression and imperialism” and they aimed “to clean up the country, strengthen the army, [and] build up the economy.”<sup>96</sup> One of the primary aims of the early Nasser government was to construct the Aswan High dam, a massive construction Nasser projected would cost \$516

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<sup>92</sup> Nasser, Gamal Abdel. *Speeches Delivered in the Northern Regional*. The University of Oregon, (1961),

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<sup>93</sup> Nasser, “Address on the Egyptian Syrian Federation.”, 240.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 240-241.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>96</sup> Kerr, *The Arab Civil War*, 8.

million. However, the attempt to build up a powerful and non-aligned Egypt did not sit well with the western powers. Due to Nasser's refusal to negotiate a peace settlement with Israel, the United States and Britain pulled a \$200 million aid package to help pay for the dam. Nasser responded in kind by announcing that Egypt would nationalize the Suez Canal Company and use the profits to build the dam.<sup>97</sup>

Considering that three quarters of French oil was transported through the Suez, losing control of the canal served as a massive national security threat to France and Britain.<sup>98</sup> Without consulting the Americans, the British, French and Israelis orchestrated a sneak attack on Egypt to take back the canal. U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower responded with fury by placing harsh economic sanctions upon the British until they agreed to a ceasefire. When the smoke settled, Nasser had his canal and had earned widespread prestige for his defiance of the imperialists. Speaking in 1960 while laying the foundation of the Aswan High Dam, Nasser proclaimed the value of the High Dam "lies in its being a resolution with which we tested our powers of endurance. We resisted and triumphed."<sup>99</sup> Perhaps the crowning moment of the short lived U.A.R., Nasser posited the Dam as the "symbol of the whole Arab Nation's determination to carry out its self-imposed task of building up the greater liberated homeland."<sup>100</sup>

Fast forward more than half a century and the U.A.R. exists only in memory. It quickly dissolved after a coup in Damascus led to Syria's withdrawal, and sentiments of pan-Arabism quickly lost their salience. Yet, references to Sykes-Picot did not fade. In 2014, as their bulldozers dismantled the Iraqi-Syrian border, the black clad soldiers of the

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<sup>97</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 172.

<sup>98</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 175.

<sup>99</sup> Nasser, Gamal Abdel. *President Gamal Abdel Nasser's Speeches and Press-Interviews*. Vol. 1, The University of Utah, (1960), 3.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

Islamic State cried out “We’ve broken Sykes-Picot” in a challenge to the nation-states of the Middle East.<sup>101</sup> While I.S. has been referenced as a terrorist organization, criminal gang, state, and countless other monikers, they have seldom been referred to as anti-colonial. However, much of I.S.’s promotional materials in their speeches and magazine *Dabiq* is intensely concerned with Sykes-Picot and the effects of colonialism in the Middle East. As al-Baghdadi promised while his soldiers conquered more and more land in Syria and Iraq, “This blessed advance will not stop until we hit the last nail in the coffin of the Sykes-Picot conspiracy.”<sup>102</sup>

I.S.’s anti-colonial challenge to the Sykes-Picot Middle East is perhaps stronger than even Nasser’s. In the ninth issue of their English language publication, *Dabiq*, I.S. provides a history lesson titled, “The Flags of Jahiliyyah.” They write that “most of the flags raised by the various apostate Arab regimes” was “designed by the British crusader Mark Sykes.”<sup>103</sup> Saudi Arabia, for example, was taken from Sharif Hussein’s family and given to the House of Saud because “The British realized ‘Abdul‘Azīz and his sons could not and would never call for further expansion of their kingdom outside of their crusader designated territory under the claim of a “caliphate,” contrary to al-Husayn and his sons who – due to their Qurashī lineage – had entertained the idea of a “caliphate.”<sup>104</sup> While Nasser believed that the U.A.R. stood as a refutation of the colonial fragmentation of the Middle East, the Islamic State rejects all nationalist states as being stooges and creations of the “crusaders.” For al-Baghdadi, the only “true” state is the Islamic State.

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<sup>101</sup> “The Islamic State.” *VICE News*.

<sup>102</sup> Wright, “The Master Plan.”

<sup>103</sup> *Dabiq Issue 9: They Plot and Allah Plots*. The Islamic State, 20.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

The Islamic State is often referenced as a terrorist organization, a criminal gang, a state, or a mysterious hybrid of all three. To navigate the widespread confusion about I.S. we can take the advice of their spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adani, when he said, “if one wants to get to know the program of the Islamic State, its politics, and its legal opinions, one ought to consult its leaders, its statements, its public addresses, its own sources.”<sup>105</sup> In this vein, we may use the model provided by Timothy Mitchell. In what follows, I analyze the publications of the Islamic State, and in doing do, demonstrate a political rationality, one intimately connected to the sentiments of anti-colonial defiance that Nasser appealed to a half century before, that has not been attributed to them through culturalist explanations.

While Mitchell was analyzing the efforts of the British colonial administration and Egyptian aristocracy to convert the Egyptian countryside into a productive space for integration into international capitalism, his point remains applicable in the context of the Islamic State. I.S. purports to be the “rightly guided caliphate,” and, consequently, the state of all true Muslims, yet this project requires the creation and propagation of a certain identity.<sup>106</sup> The question is then to determine what type of identity the Islamic State is attempting to produce. I argue that I.S. aims to produce an apolitical population that places unwavering faith into the particular salafist understanding of Islam most prominently put forward by al-Zarqawi a decade earlier.

Mitchell’s state-as-effect theory is primarily concerned with the production of citizens through a diffuse, contradictory, and complicated web of disciplinary processes. One of the primary forms of disciplinary powers identified by Mitchell is the school.

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<sup>105</sup> Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*, 4.

<sup>106</sup> Olidort, Jacob. *Inside the Caliphate's Classroom*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, (2016), 52.

Describing the schooling reforms in early 19th century Egypt, Mitchell writes, “to change the tastes and habits of an entire people, politics had to seize upon the individual, and by the new means of education make him or her into a modern political subject.”<sup>107</sup> The colonial administration aimed to produce individuals that lived a “frugal, innocent, and, above all, busy” life through a tight control over schooling.<sup>108</sup> The type of individual I.S. aims to produce, as well as the importance of the disciplinary powers of schooling to I.S., is clearly evident within the general introduction of each and every textbook released by the Islamic State which are self described as the “brick[s] among the bricks of building the edifice of the caliphate.”<sup>109</sup> The introduction declares that I.S. has successfully created “an Islamic education founded upon the methodology of the Quran, the Prophetic guidance and the understanding of the pious predecessors and their first troops.”<sup>110</sup> Here, I.S. lays out the only acceptable source material of a “true” Islamic education. Only through Quranic exegesis and the Hadith can the “true” will of Allah be surmised, and any action taken must be justifiable from these sources. The introduction goes on to denounce “whims, falsities, and deviances” from Prophetic example and “corrupt innovated methodologies” to further cement that it is the job of the reader to be told and not to critically engage.<sup>111</sup> Theology is not a debate for the Islamic State but a revelation.

Importantly, the introductions’ pronouncement that this Islamic education is a “pure vision that is neither Eastern nor Western” leads to a number of important connections with Nasser’s anti-colonial nationalism.<sup>112</sup> The salafist ideology put forth in

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<sup>107</sup> Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, 75.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>109</sup> Olidort, *Inside the Caliphate’s Classroom*, 52.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

the introduction is positioned as completely independent of human imposition. Neither “Eastern socialism or Western capitalism” has any part to do with a true education. In this regard, the text positions I.S. unevenly within the legacy of Nasser’s non-alignment movement between the American and Soviet camps. By rejecting both Eastern and Western colonial designs, the Islamic State views itself as defiant to all earthly sovereignty. In the *Textbook on Creed*, I.S. provides a lesson about the history of nationalism and patriotism. It reads, “the enemies of the faith divided the lands of Islam into states and drew artificial borders for each part, and gave each a flag. Then the unbelievers... sought to plant the glorification of education and patriotism into the hearts of Muslims so that they would rid their hearts of Islamic unity.”<sup>113</sup> Once again, the post-WWI partition of the Middle East figures prominently as a target of their anger. But here I.S. also makes reference to the colonial processes described by Mitchell. The production of capitalist subjects by the colonial administration was so reviled by I.S. because it removed Islamic unity and piety and replaced it with nationalism.

Throughout the textbooks of the Islamic State, there is an important emphasis placed on the supremacy of divine law in political life. In the lesson about democracy, they write, “God Almighty is the creator of everything, and He is the one who commands and legislates... No one may legislate alongside God or choose what opposes God’s rule.”<sup>114</sup> Since democracy gives political sovereignty to the people, it qualifies as unbelief and must be opposed at all turns. Immediately following this section, a set of preparatory questions appear, which would not look out of place in an American textbook. The questions help students summarize their learning from the lesson. Here we see a clear

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 53.

example of how I.S. has subverted the forms and processes introduced by colonialism and utilized them for counter-hegemonic purposes. And yet, while I.S. utilizes the forms and strategies of the colonial powers, it is important to note these differences in the content of their disciplinary processes. At first glance, the use of colonial state power to combat the lasting vestiges of colonialism in the Middle East seems paradoxical. Chatterjee's discussion of the postcolonial formation of the nation allows us to make sense of this. Chatterjee writes that the attempt by the formerly colonized world to build national identity was "deeply contradictory" as it was "both imitative and hostile to the models it imitate[d]."<sup>115</sup> When viewed within Chatterjee's theory, the disciplinary processes of the Islamic State should be considered as both an imitation and a subversion of the colonial model. Using a textbook modeled after Western, secular education to dismiss the righteousness of democracy and nationalism stands as an apt example.

Another important disciplinary strategy discussed by Mitchell and Foucault is the utilization of punishment. This is perhaps the most infamous and widely discussed aspect of the Islamic State's political project. In the city of Raqqa, a Vice News documentary team was allowed to accompany the Hisbah, an institution of the Islamic State responsible for enforcing Shari'ah<sup>116</sup> law, during their daily rounds of the marketplace. Abu Obida, a patrol leader for Hisbah, states, "My job is to establish the caliphate... and to do that, we have to teach others what to do and what not to do."<sup>117</sup> After stopping to ensure that a couple walking down the street were in fact married, Obida ominously

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<sup>115</sup> Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 2.

<sup>116</sup> It is once again important to note that the Shari'ah law enforced by I.S. is not synonymous with other forms of the Shari'ah throughout the Islamic World. What constitutes divine law is heavily contested, and the approach of I.S. largely rejects over a thousand years of Islamic jurisprudence.

<sup>117</sup> "The Islamic State.", *VICE News*.

declared, “we advise in a nice way, but those who don’t obey will be forced.”<sup>118</sup> While the documentary crew walks through the local prison, the fear is evident upon the faces of the men inside. Arrested for hiding alcohol, drugs, swearing, or other infractions of the Shari’ah, these men face whippings, beatings, amputations, or death. The powerful effects, or at least intentions, of this fear are the production of a populace that swears off both the vices prohibited by Islamic law, but also dissent towards the strict regime of I.S.

The public nature of the Islamic State’s corporal punishment has received a significant amount of attention and is often used as evidence to paint I.S. as a medieval and antiquated group. For Michel Foucault, a defining characteristic about modern disciplinary power was that punishment became “the most hidden part of the penal process.”<sup>119</sup> The effectiveness of justice in modern society “is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity.”<sup>120</sup> The Hisbah stands as an apt example of how once again I.S. confounds theories of how modern state power ought to function. On the one hand, the Hisbah is responsible for walking the streets and arbitrating conflicts, as well as enforcing existing law. In essence, they are agents of the modern disciplinary processes discussed by Foucault. On the other hand, when infractions occur, they utilize sovereign power to carry out public and graphic punishments. The embodiment of both sovereign and disciplinary power in the Hisbah seems paradoxical. However, if we view I.S. as a complex mixture of Western forms of political organization and the Islamic State’s own brand of Islamic jurisprudence, the Hisbah, much like Chakrabarty’s peasant, ought to be seen as a contemporary of modernity.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage, (1995), 9.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

Through their strict disciplinarian regime, the Islamic State aims to create a citizen prepared for physical combat, loyal to a political system based upon “divine” rather than human sovereignty, and staunchly opposed to non-Sunni interference in the region for it was colonial rule as much as Muslim decadence which led the Islamic community away from the “true” faith. However, it is now important to discuss what this understanding of the Islamic State allows. By examining the strategies and values I.S. utilizes in their state project, we are able to leave behind culturalist tropes that position I.S. as a manifestation of the Middle East’s inability to adapt to modernity. Rather, I.S. is a truly modern project geared towards achieving political sovereignty in the Middle East and removing the vestiges of colonial and nationalist rule. If we are able to view the Islamic State as a political organization, with rational goals and a desire to achieve political aims, rather than a manifestation of an innate Arab penchant for violence and hate of civilization, then new policy solutions to combat them may arise.

## VI. Conclusion

*“Humanity today is standing at the brink of an abyss, not because of the threat of annihilation hanging over its head-- for this is just a symptom of the disease and not the disease itself-- but because humanity is bankrupt in the realm of values, those values which foster true human progress and development.”<sup>121</sup>*

- Sayyid Qutb, *Signposts Along the Road*

Abnormality is too often treated as a dead end. The results are askew. The models do not fit perfectly. The hypotheses are not proved to be true. These moments should not be the source of confusion or frustration, but, rather, an opportunity to reevaluate the metrics and methodologies we use. The state in the Middle East seems abnormal. Conventional political science explains this abnormality as the result of either an incomplete adoption of the Western model or, a resistance to it, often due to immutable differences between competing cultures. The fault of these approaches is their inability to critically engage with the analytical tools they are using.

The dangers of this failure are evident in the widespread destruction and violence present across large swathes of the Middle East today. That which cannot be understood cannot be negotiated with. The devastation of Syria and Iraq ought to stand as a chilling reminder of the results of Western military intervention in the region. Like Nasser, the Islamic State mobilizes the feelings of humiliation, defeat, and anger that remain prevalent across the Middle East in the aftermath of European and American colonial rule. Many of the states in the region have only been able to maintain legitimacy through the use of immense force and oppression. As the Arab Spring demonstrated, and the Syrian Civil War continues to teach us, widespread discontent with states persists across

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<sup>121</sup> Euben, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 138.

the region. American military interference has so far played into the hands of al-Qaeda and I.S. recruiters' messages of an apocalyptic battle between "crusaders" and the faithful. Even as American and Russian bombers push I.S. deeper and deeper into the desert, their message rings more and more compelling. As al-Baghdadi chided Iraqi Sunnis during the Siege of Mosul in 2016, "Do you not see the Rafida, every day, afflicting you with the worst of torment? They raid your lands under the pretext of waging war against the Islamic State, then they don't depart until they've either killed your men and taken your women and children prisoner or until they've driven them out."<sup>122</sup> If policymakers wish for I.S. to be truly defeated, it must be through a strategy that deals with the underlying issues that accommodated their rise. Recognizing the Islamic State does not also require a condoning of their institution of sexual slavery or beheading, just as recognizing the United States does not condone drone strikes on children or the use of uranium bullets in civilian areas. To acknowledge the political agency of actors does not equate with approval.

If military force is the primary tool of combatting groups like the Islamic State, we risk allowing I.S. media to continue painting the group as the true defender of the Muslim community. Perhaps the successes of I.S. and Nasser's U.A.R. can give insight into a path forward in the Middle East. The RAND Corporation published a report that analyzed satellite imagery of I.S. territory to get a sense of life under the Caliphate. In cities like Ramadi and Tikrit where I.S. was struggling to hold territory to coalition advances, "its rule brought economic decay."<sup>123</sup> Commercial trucks vanished from the roads, marketplaces were empty, and electricity was hardly present in spite of the group's

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<sup>122</sup> Orton, Kyle. "Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi Calls for the Islamic State to Stand Firm in Mosul." *The Syrian Intifada*, 11 Nov. 2016.

<sup>123</sup> Irving, Doug. "What Life Under ISIS Looked Like from Space." *RAND Corporation*, 9 Jan. 2018.

massive stores of oil to keep the generators running. However, in the secure portions of the Caliphate, “satellite images showed some evidence of effective governance.”<sup>124</sup> In Raqqa, lights ran in the hospitals demonstrating control over the electrical grids. In Mosul, massive open air shopping centers were “bustling with shoppers and car traffic.”<sup>125</sup> The report concludes by declaring, “without the military campaign to retake this territory, the Islamic State could have tried to replicate some of the modest success it experienced in Mosul and Raqqa. We would be facing a much different enemy.”<sup>126</sup>

The approach offered by Nasser’s U.A.R. to combating Western colonialism and improving the quality of life in the region stands as more appealing than the brutal violence of I.S. decapitations and sexual slavery, yet let us not forget Nasser was vehemently opposed by the West during his reign. Nasser’s revolutionary socialism promised a fight “for social justice, social freedom and equality, for eradication of Imperialism and its stooges, for liquidation of feudalism, and suppression of domination of capital over the government, for the establishment of social justice.”<sup>127</sup> The implications of Arab control over their own destiny gave just as much anxiety to American and British policy-makers in the 1950s as they did in the 1910s. British Foreign Minister Selwyn Lloyd described Nasser as a “paranoiac” with the “same type of mind as Hitler.”<sup>128</sup> American Secretary of State for President Eisenhower John Foster Dulles warned the Egyptian ambassador that Americans “believed Nasser had made a bargain with the Devil” with the hope of “establishing an empire stretching from the

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Nasser, *Speeches Delivered in the Northern Regional*, 5.

<sup>128</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 173.

Persian Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean.”<sup>129</sup> As long as the West is unable to allow political autonomy in the Middle East, or at least refrain from using force to advocate for change, future anti-colonial movements in the region might look not to Nasser, but to al-Baghdadi as a model for success.<sup>130</sup> A future that few will look towards with hope.

In the meantime, future research can consider an important critique against Mitchell’s *Colonizing Egypt* offered by Khaled Fahmy in his book *All the Pasha’s Men*. While Mitchell’s theoretical framework takes into account the way disciplinary power “offer[s] spaces for resistance, and indeed can be turned to counter hegemonic purposes,” Fahmy argues Mitchell’s account of state formation in Egypt misses the reality of the situation.<sup>131</sup> He writes, “Mitchell’s main task remains... to see how these ‘enframing devices’... were drafted and conceived of, rather than how they were implemented and executed.”<sup>132</sup> While Fahmy’s critique is not directed towards Mitchell’s state theory at large, it makes an important point about the material Mitchell draws upon for his analysis. By omitting non-elite voices, Mitchell is unable to get the full picture of how disciplinary power created a new citizen, geared towards colonial production. This critique is also somewhat applicable to my own analysis due to my inability to read Arabic, as well as the overall lack of access to primary source material coming from within the Islamic State which contest the dominant narratives offered by I.S. leadership. Yet, rather than invalidating the work, the incompleteness of my source material merely means the final picture I am able to draw is incomplete. The goals and schemes of I.S.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>130</sup> It is also important to recognize that Nasser was not a heroic figure to all. The members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and other political opponents, that he tortured and jailed, would certainly not paint Nasser in such a positive light.

<sup>131</sup> Mitchell, “The Limits of the State.”, 93.

<sup>132</sup> Fahmy, Khaled. *All the Pasha's Men*. Cambridge University Press, (1997), 31.

leaders still adequately show the emotions and tools they mobilize to create productive citizens. The extent of their success in achieving this goal will, however, require an analysis in the mould of Fahmy to truly determine. The recent dump of I.S. government documents made public by Rukmini Callimachi in the New York Times, as well as testimony from the citizens of Raqqa and Mosul, ought to serve as a jumping off point for future research.

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