

De Facto States Unbound

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De facto states are political entities that possess control of territory but lack international recognition. Such entities appear to [violate the norm of border fixity and the principle of territorial integrity in multiple ways](#). The mere existence of these de facto states seems to represent a thorn in the side of the contemporary state system as a whole. The breakaway of one state is just a step on the slippery slope, what some have recently referred to as the “Kosovo precedent.” Once emboldened, secessionist movements threaten to rip apart every state, particularly those whose provenance is already based on shaky colonial foundations. Ultimately, the entire international system could founder.

In this memo we draw a distinction between bounded and unbounded de facto states based on the differing relationships of various de facto states to the basic principles of the international system. Most de facto states are distinctly bounded. Their ruling elites lay claim to a specific piece of territory, and they derive their legitimacy from a clearly defined notion of peoplehood. In contrast, unbounded de facto states recognize no territorial limits in their [understanding of peoplehood](#).

Both bounded and unbounded de facto states are necessarily motivated by *exclusionary* definitions of peoplehood. But bounded de facto states make inherently limited and sovereign claims in the name of a specific “core group.” These core groups are typically defined by ethnic, religious, linguistic, tribal, racial attributes, and/or cultural practices. Unbounded states are motivated by equally discriminating narratives about a core group, but with a twist: they lay claim over the globe. Such unbounded narratives take many forms and have many protagonists, including the global proletariat in the

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Communist narrative and, more recently, the Islamic *ummah* (nation) for the Islamic State.

Though damaging to the parent state(s) that previously encompassed them, bounded de facto states [do not spell the demise of the international system as whole](#). In contrast, “unbounded” de facto states, despite their rarity, appear to disrupt the entire international system. These political entities, such as the Islamic State with its religious underpinnings—like many [previous revolutionary states and/or organizations](#)—are the ultimate revisionist players in the international system, seeking to undo the very foundations of sovereignty. Over time, though, these unbounded players can gradually learn the “rules of the game” and become reconciled to and integrated within the international system.

Bounded vs. Unbounded De Facto Statehood

Most de facto states have modest ambitions. They dispute particular state forms, but they also tend to adopt many of the normative aspects of statehood upon which the international community is based. As de facto states pursue equal standing and acceptance in international society, they mimic and reaffirm many of its basic premises. They strive to demonstrate that they can abide by the rules of the game.

To be sure, de facto states represent themselves to the international community in a variety of ways, while seeking [to bootstrap their empirical hold on power into recognition by the international community](#). Often these attempts are geared to appealing to particular external patrons. In the post-Soviet space, de facto states like Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria have staked their legitimacy on support from—and often mimicry of—Russia. In its separatist struggle from Russia in the 1990s, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria became increasingly oriented toward gaining support from fellow Islamic states, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Afghanistan.

In the Middle East, de facto states have often crafted a particular pro-American image. The Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq has for decades portrayed itself as an outpost of pluralistic democracy (despite the increasingly evident corruption of the ruling KDP-PUK duopoly). The more recently emergent Rojava (Western Kurdistan) has crafted itself as a unique version of multi-ethnic participatory democracy. Finally, the unrecognized Libyan General National Congress in Tripoli and its Libya Dawn Coalition depict themselves as stalwarts in the campaign against Islamic extremism.

All in all, statehood is an enormously attractive mode of political governance based around the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence over specific territorial boundaries and borders. Even groups that are disinterested in statehood or doubtful of the idea of territorial limits on state power and national membership are often

eventually drawn to emulate it. While states may try to mobilize diasporas and ethnic kin abroad, they often end up [protecting sovereign prerogatives and reinforcing territorial limits on authority.](#)

However, there is another type of de facto state, the unbounded, that appears to pose a much more significant threat to the international system. Unbounded de facto states, the ultimate revisionist powers in the international system. They are not territorially bounded, and premised on less corporeal and more symbolic forms of national identity. In this sense, they might resemble terrorist or criminal networks. But terrorists, criminals, or warlords can share space with other political powers or inhabit the underbelly of state control. De facto states, in contrast, demand undisputed territorial control. The distinguishing feature of unbounded de facto states is that they see territorial boundaries as temporary frontiers, not eventual borders. They anticipate no end to their expansion. This is particularly the case when the content of their belief system is too broad and universalist to be territorially constrained. As David Armstrong puts it in *Revolution and World Order*, they have “dual identity” as both territorially-specified states and as “centers of would be universal movements.” For such states, pursuing expansion as demanded by their motivating doctrine, while at the same time consolidating power within their territorial core, is a major challenge.

Becoming Unbounded

How do unbounded de facto states come about and what is their impact on the international state system? Multiple factors foster the unique conditions for the emergence of unbounded de facto states. First and most obviously is the weakening of parent states. Second is the weakening of regional hierarchy and power structures that would otherwise suppress unbounded de facto state contenders. This situation allows revisionist de facto states to break away and establish new territorial foundations. Finally, the leaders of de facto states themselves eschew territorial delimitation, harboring a vision of peoplehood that focuses on extra-territorial bonds, such as creed, faith, or class. Where and when these factors dissipate so too does the vitality of unbounded de facto states.

There are historical examples of the emergence of such actors. The French revolutionaries, as Edmund Burke warned, conceded no territorial limits in their effort to spread the gospel of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* worldwide. Similarly, upon seizing power in Russia in 1917, the Bolsheviks committed themselves to a global revolution of the working class against capitalists and feudalists everywhere. The goal of revolution was not new. What was novel was the opportunity to pursue it in a post-World War I era where imperial powers were torn asunder. As the international system re-aligned and new states emerged, structural pressures forced the Soviet Union to become more circumspect in its internationalist commitment. Instead of revolutionary exporters, the

Soviet leadership became domestic state-builders, committed to building communism in one country only.

A similar story is evident in the Wahhabi movement in Arabia. The Wahhabis claimed to represent the sole true interpretation of Islam globally, deeming all others to be unbelievers and backsliders. Seizing the opportunity of the steady erosion of Ottoman supremacy, the Wahhabis built a number of alliances with the Saud dynasty in Najd and expanded their political control. The first Saudi-Wahhabi “state” formed in 1744 and lasted until 1818, when Mehmet Ali Pasha, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt, destroyed it. The second Saudi-Wahhabi state lasted from 1824 until almost the turn of the 20th century, but it was perennially plagued by rivalry conflicts with the al-Rashid clan. The third (and present) Saudi-Wahhabi state emerged in 1902 in Najd, seized al-Hassa from Ottoman control in 1913, and finally took Mecca and Medina in 1924 in the chaos of the post-World War I era. Wahhabi raiders, known as the *Ikhwan* (Brotherhood), recognized no limits to expanding their revolutions and imposing their ideology, even attacking Shiite holy sites in British-held Iraq. Finally, Ibn Saud had to dismantle and domesticate these raiders and accede to territorial limits to his ambitions.

Today, the Islamic State appears to face a similar dilemma. Its ascent must be viewed in tandem and in contrast to that of al-Qaeda (AQ), the organization from which it splintered. AQ began as a kind of coordinating committee for various Arabs that came to fight in Afghanistan in the 1980s and then in the civil war of the 1990s. Under Osama bin Laden, AQ’s mission broadened to promoting jihad worldwide. Pan-Islamic in perspective and multinational in composition, AQ recognized no territorial limits on its engagements. It rejected the division of the Muslim people by illegitimate pseudo-Muslim states. AQ thus seemed to pose a fundamentally [unbounded challenge to the international system](#).

AQ, however, never defined itself as a state, but as an organizational base (*qa’eda*) for global Islamic revolution. It cultivated state allies, first in Sudan and then in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In each of these locations, AQ’s globalist aspirations sat uneasily with the interests and demands of their host states. Yet the territorial logic proved irresistible even for AQ. By the mid-2000s AQ had begun creating new cells and sometimes adopting existing jihadi groups as AQ “franchises.” In so doing, however, AQ’s organizational structure began to replicate the bounded national-territorial divisions that it sought to overcome. Exactly contrary to AQ’s original intent to offer a global, unified revolutionary command, franchisees vied with each other—and with other Islamic groups—for power. Rather than modeling universalist Islam, AQ came to reflect the very territorial parochialism it claimed to overcome.

The Islamic State broke away from AQ amidst a dispute between Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden’s successor as AQ’s global leader, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who had taken over al-Qaeda in Iraq. The dispute centered on whether al-Qaeda in Iraq would

represent AQ in the Syrian civil war or should yield to another group designated by al-Zawahiri, the al-Nusra Front. Al-Baghdadi tried to force the al-Nusra Front to accept his control by fait accompli, declaring the formation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in 2013. After over a year of internecine fighting, al-Zawahiri definitively expelled al-Baghdadi in 2014.

IS's self-proclaimed status as a state (*dawlah*) was a clear indication of a difference in priorities with its former parent organization. On top of AQ's designs for global revolution, IS was also concerned with practical matters of governance. The original incarnation of IS seemed to accept some form of territorial boundary (at least implicitly). While information is spotty, witnesses in IS-ruled Raqqa or Mosul have reported many similarities with statehood elsewhere in the Arab world. Duly authorized jurists mete out rulings, police apprehend and punish criminals, and tax inspectors scour for contraband, albeit derived from an idiosyncratic and puritanical interpretation of Islamic scripture. Fiscally, oil exports and smuggling provide a revenue stream. IS has even reportedly begun circulating its own currency. IS administrators, engineers, and technocrats (many of whom are Iraqi Sunni ex-Baathists) work to ensure that key resources, including water, electricity, foodstuffs, and gasoline, are selectively distributed to reward regime supporters and punish the recalcitrant. A skeletal welfare state provides healthcare and pensions for mujahedeen and their dependents. Finally, just like Saddam Hussein and many other Arab authoritarian rulers, IS maintains its neo-patriarchal hegemony through the brutal exercise of [sexual violence](#) to subjugate and terrorize minority populations.

While IS definitely strives to build the core of a new state straddling the Syrian-Iraqi border, it has also become progressively *un*-bounded in its approach to territory. Al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph, the direct successor of the Prophet claiming the leadership of all Muslims around the globe. Some of IS's most important military leaders, like Omar al-Shishani, are veteran mujahedeen from Chechnya. IS refuses to accept the legitimacy of any other Muslim state because it claims that in most cases those states are derived from illegitimate colonial origins or international borders that divide the Islamic *ummah*. Moreover, jihadi groups from around the world, including the Caucasus and Central Asia, Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, and Palestine, have declared their allegiance to the Islamic State. All in all, akin to the original Wahhabi raiders, IS insists that the limits of its political control represent only [temporary frontiers, not definitive boundaries](#). Ultimately, the IS flag follows the faithful regardless of their geographic location.

Domesticating Unbounded De Facto States

The Islamic State is adamant that its statehood knows no bounds. Yet IS's internal functions look remarkably conventional, at least by the standards of the rest of the Arab

world. The question remains if and [under what conditions IS's leadership will adopt fixed territorial boundaries.](#)

Many factors can compel an unbounded de facto state to hew more closely to territorially delimited logic. The concerns of internal state-building may ultimately outweigh the impulse for territorial expansion, especially if that expansion comes at grave economic, political, or military costs. Great and regional powers can re-assert the importance of border fixity and re-align to neutralize aspirant state-makers or force them to adapt to specific territorial limits. In the case of IS, the de jure states surrounding it are already aligned to confront and counter it. Military defeat or economic competition can also weaken and eventually extinguish unbounded claimants to power from the international system through an evolutionary process of the survival of the fittest. Moreover, the fact that IS has a territorial foothold also means that, unlike AQ or other transnational terrorist organizations, it can be deterred more effectively and punished if it does not play by the rules. Positive incentives may also work. Patron states have often bribed churlish de facto states to keep the peace and curb their expansionary tendencies.

Importantly, the international system has proven to be resilient and flexible in the face of unbounded extraterritorial challenges. Many otherwise bounded states engage routinely in extra-territorial practices. For instance, U.S. anti-terror and anti-money laundering laws are imposed globally, whether or not the crime occurs on American soil. More commonly, many states have far-flung diaspora populations that they engage to muster political and economic support. Unbounded de facto states, then, may be more readily assimilated into the international system than previously feared.