

## INTRODUCTION

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### In Search of the Islamic State

Year after year, Sudan has placed among the top three countries on *Foreign Policy's* annual Failed State Index.<sup>1</sup> Scoring a perfect ten for internally displaced persons, external intervention, group grievances, and factionalized elites, Sudan serves as a near archetype of the nonfunctioning state. Media portrayals of rampant interethnic violence, famine, and displacement reinforce this perception. Yet, even with the loss of territory following the secession of South Sudan in 2011, the persistent civil war in Darfur and the “new South” (those regions of Sudan that once were in the center of the country and now are in its southern reaches, following partition), and great economic uncertainty, the Sudanese state somehow continues to function, the National Congress (*née* National Islamic Front) party sitting firmly in power for over twenty-five years, despite persistent internal divisions. While the events of the Arab Spring and their reversal have made scholars of the region know better than to predict continuing stability, the itinerary of the longest-standing government in Sudan's postcolonial history and its experiment with establishing what its intellectuals called “the Islamic state” is in need of study, no matter what tomorrow may bring. This is particularly true now as a variety of regimes across the region are experimenting with their own Islamization projects or are seeking to unravel them. Indeed, while *Foreign Policy* looks at formal indicators such as “uneven development,” “economic decline,” and “external intervention” as evidence of a state's health (or, more precisely, the lack thereof), it overlooks a series of factors that make states like Sudan endure, despite their failure to meet the journal's indices of full-sovereignty and economic well-being. What would a study of Sudan look like that did not take its lacks and lacunas, its under-development and instability, as a starting point? What do we learn if we examine state power as productive and not solely repressive,<sup>2</sup> and if we explore the Sudanese public as made up of agents of its modernity and not merely victims of power struggles from on high? This book attempts to answer these questions.

1 [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/24/2013\\_failed\\_states\\_interactive\\_map](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/24/2013_failed_states_interactive_map).

2 Whether the state is thereby *oppressive* is another question entirely. For many, certainly so; for those whose conditions have improved under it, perhaps not—but I leave the polemic against the state to others better positioned to wield it, given their more immediate stake in its success or failure.

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My first foray into studying the Sudanese state was beset by a paradox not unrelated to that which confronts the Failed State Index. I initially went to Sudan in the summer of 2003 with the idea of studying how the state reproduced its Islamist ideology through an examination of the Sudanese national secondary school curriculum. At that point in time, Sudan was the only country in the Arabic-speaking world where an Islamist organization, so common as political opposition, had taken the reins of power.<sup>3</sup> While Islamist notions of government could be studied as a theoretical framework across the Arabic-speaking world, Sudan seemed to me then (and it still does now) the perfect place to find out what modern Islamic governance looks like in practice, when it is forced to confront the complexity of the modern nation-state and the diverse publics to which it must cater. Sudan was the first country in the Arabic-speaking world where a modern Islamist movement (in this case, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood) had the chance to apply its elaborate theories, so often faulted for their vagueness on specifics.<sup>4</sup> The researcher had the added benefit in Sudan that its Islamic movement had been in power for a considerable time, enabling a diachronic view of policies as they responded to the complexities of governance, and as the governed responded to them.

Yet, when I arrived in Sudan, I made the rather unsettling discovery that I could not find the state in the places where I had expected it to be. I traveled to my field sites, to the Ministry of Education and to the curriculum-building

3 Outside of the Arab world, the reader with knowledge of Iran will likely be able to draw important parallels between its Islamic revolution of 1979 and Sudan's Islamist coup only ten years later. While the Sudanese Islamists were surely inspired by the Iranian model, Sudan's relationship to Iran (both ideological and political) has always been unstable due in great measure to popular antipathy towards Shi'i modes of Islam (indeed, in recent years, as Sudan has moved closer to Saudi Arabia, the Iranian presence has been almost entirely erased with the formerly influential Iranian Cultural Center shuttered and diplomatic relations falling to an all-time low). There is not sufficient room here to explore what parallels we may draw between the two Islamist experiments, but I hope future researchers will examine this topic. For literature on Iran's Islamic state project, see Fischer 2003, Mottahedeh 1985, and Varzi 2006, as well as forthcoming work from a host of scholars currently doing interesting work in Iran including Alireza Doostdar, Narges Erami, Elham Miresheghi, Hosna Sheikholeslami, and Rose Wellman.

4 By "modern Islamist movement," I am referring to those groups that emerged out of the cauldron of European colonialism and saw their intervention as a response to the questions it posed, accepting, at least in part, the institutional and intellectual categories that colonialism provided, but filling them with Islamic content. The Muslim Brotherhood is the most famous representative of such a trend. So, for example, the eighteenth-century movement of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab neither fits this category historically, emerging as it did out of internal theological dispute rather than colonial intervention, nor intellectually, addressing a series of doctrinal matters that have tended not to be of great concern to modern Islamist movements, preoccupied as the latter are with the challenge of secularism and Westernization. For a useful comparison of the difference between these two "Islamist" trends at their origins, see Haj 2009, particularly chapter 1.

center at Bakht al-Ridda on the White Nile, only to find that the curriculum that was now being discussed was one that had been developed by the United Nations.<sup>5</sup> This curriculum focused on peace-building and multicultural education, preparing for the “period of national unity” that the expected signing of the peace agreement with the restive South in 2005 would bring about. There was no discernible program of Islamic state-building. At first it seemed to me that the Islamic state was nowhere to be found, that the Sudanese state indeed was a failed project, existing in a position of international guardianship, in which, as in the case of the remnants of the colonial projects that had preceded it, some of the bureaucracy was nevertheless left intact. Frantically, I wrote my funders, asking if it would be acceptable if I spent my grants on another sort of project (intrareligious controversy? religious reform movements? Sufi revivalism?), since the Sudanese Islamic state project that I had come to study seemed to have vanished before I even arrived.

It was in this moment of crisis, however, ironically just when I began to contemplate abandoning the state as an object of inquiry, that I began to encounter the state in unexpected places. In my rather dejected travels on public transport from ministry to ministry, government office to government office—that is, in my quest to find the Islamic state in the places one would expect it to be—I began actually to listen to what was going on around me. So sure of the models of governance that I’d brought with me into the field, models that prepared me to find the state lodged in institutions that projected power downwards onto “society,” I had deafened myself to the resonances of the state that emerged in other places. It was when I took out my virtual earplugs that the presence of the Islamic state, so elusive in those government offices, came blaring to the surface, and I began to find what I had come to study, though in very different places from where I had expected to find it.

The Sudanese soundscape was staffed with notes of this elusive state. It was on those bus rides across town that I began to hear them most clearly: bus radios constantly blasting popified *madih* (Islamic praise poetry), which my fellow passengers informed me were enjoying a renaissance under the current regime that supported their resurgence through radio projects and state television; the cacophony of sounds emerging from new mosques built with state funds and broadcasting not only the call to prayer but myriad

5 The ability of NGOs to “see” and order the world like a state (Scott 1998) is a topic of increasing interest in anthropology, as several recent works have shown (e.g., Bernal and Grewal 2014; see also Trouillot 2001: 132). This parallel state was alive and well in Sudan during the entirety of my stay there, serving functions from education to security, though it is not the topic of my study here. Mark Massoud’s recent book *Law’s Fragile State: Colonial, Authoritarian and Humanitarian Legacies in Sudan* (2013) amply discusses the interaction of the humanitarian reason of international governance organizations and the legal apparatus of the formal state.

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other pious activities going on under their roofs; debates over whose hands could touch whose as the young *kumsārī* (fare collector) returned riders' change, citing state-enforced norms on dress and public comportment, while reworking and reappraising them. While the integrity of the state seemed to be disintegrating in government offices, occupied as they were by international powers, on those bus rides the state seemed alive and vibrant all around me. Far from the ministries of central Khartoum, the state had become "a social subject in everyday life" (Aretxaga 2003: 395), reproduced in the discourses, the practices, and the very bodies of the subjects who lived in its midst.

The state may have failed according to the criteria of *Foreign Policy's* index, yet by producing and sustaining novel publics, it has in fact endured. The state seemed absent in my visits to the ministries, but on my bus rides across town I nevertheless seemed to find it everywhere. Clearly we are in need of not only new frameworks for understanding the state (a task I leave, for the most part, to political scientists), but also empirical research that can substantiate the life of the state from which such theorizing might proceed. Taking off from this challenge, this book is a study of the experiment with the Islamic state in Sudan. It looks primarily not at state institutions, but rather at the daily life that goes on in their shadows, examining the lasting effects of state Islamization on Sudanese society through a study of the individuals and organizations that function in its midst.<sup>6</sup> As such, it takes as its interlocutors Sudanese working within the conditions of possibility provided by the state and its Islamist project. For whether a critic or a champion of state Islamism, no one in Sudan could ignore its pull. This situation was partly a result of the power of the ruling Islamist elite and its dominance over political, legal, and economic realms, which shaped a bureaucracy in

6 Michel-Rolph Trouillot expresses this concept of the state unbounded from institutional life and describes the kind of ethnography necessary to study it. He writes, "Though linked to a number of apparatuses not all of which may be governmental, the state is not an apparatus, but a set of processes. It is not necessarily bound by an institution, nor can any institution fully encapsulate it. At that level, its materiality resides much less in its institutions than in the reworking of processes and relations of power, so as to create new spaces for the deployment of power. . . . Anthropology may not find the state ready-made, waiting for our ethnographic gaze in the known sites of national government. . . . We may have to insist on encounters that are not immediately transparent. We may indeed have to revert to the seemingly timeless banality of daily life" (Trioullot 2001: 127, 133). Political theorist Wendy Brown expresses a similar sentiment when she writes, "Despite the almost unavoidable tendency to speak of the state as an 'it,' the domain we call the state is not a thing, system or subject, but a significantly unbounded terrain of powers and techniques, an ensemble of discourses, rules and practices cohabiting in limiting, tension-ridden, and often contradictory relation to each other" (Brown 1995: 174; cited on p. 398 of Aretxaga 2003). Yael Navaro-Yashin's work (2002) takes up the kind of research Trioullot and Brown suggest and equally provides an inspiration for my observations in what follows.

which to be legible one had to be Islamic. Yet the magnetism of Islamism (here I mean the term simply to refer to the animation of the political sphere with Islamic principles) was also due to the fact that the Islam on which it relied was not merely a bureaucratic logic, but a normative framework that far exceeded the state, one that individuals inhabited regardless of their positions on the particular government in question.

While the authoritarian, and indeed despotic, features of Sudan's Islamic state project are well known and rightly decried, what is less understood is the kind of political culture the Islamic state enabled. Actors who previously had little political involvement were suddenly pulled into a political conversation they had not created but to which they came to contribute in increasingly creative ways by dint of their authority within the Islamic tradition. People who had understood themselves for generations as anti-Islamist began to express their political participation in Islamic terms, as the only recognized language of political discourse increasingly became that of Islam.

Yet, as the regime made Islam the primary source of political legitimacy, it paradoxically opened itself up to endless challenge. If Sunni Islam is known for not having a clergy, Sudanese Islam takes this in an even more robust direction. In Sudan, there is no single paradigmatic institution for the production of Islamic leadership, no al-Azhar as in Egypt, no Qayrawan as in Tunisia. While many have attempted to create such an institution (as we will see in Chapters 1 and 2), precisely to guard against the proliferation of claims to Islamic authority, none have been successful. This book will examine the political space that was opened by the Islamic state and the way that a surprising set of actors and classical Islamic genres (from hagiography to poetry to sermons on Muslim doctrine) came to fill that space. It will do so through framing contemporary Islamic politics not merely as a response to secularism or Western domination, as it is often positioned in the literature, but rather as situated in a much longer conversation in Islamic thought, here at the node of a more-than-two-decade-long experience with the Islamic state. In the process, this book will explore how the Islamic grammars produced by the state were fulfilled, augmented, and reappropriated as its projects of reform became objects of debate and controversy. Understanding this process is crucial today, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, when so many claimants to "the Islamic state" have arisen, but almost no research has taken place that has explored how such a political formation is sustained.

The chapters that follow are situated in conversation with a burgeoning literature on theories of the Islamic state that, while engaging political science and Islamic studies, has rarely been taken up in political anthropology or the anthropology of religion, the perspectives from which I approach this unique political model. In some of this literature, the idea of the "Islamic state" has served to fulfill aspirations for cultural sovereignty and new forms

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of ethical political practice (Abu Rabi 1996; Euben 1999). In others, of course, it is seen as a violator of the proper domains of both religion and politics (e.g., An-Na'im 2008), evidence that the Muslim world is slipping backwards in what was once seen as a universal march toward history's end. Still others have argued for the incompatibility between Islam as a moral project and the mode of subjectivation forwarded by the modern state (Hallaq 2013). Yet, while much scholarship has focused on the idea and ideals of the Islamic state, its possibilities and impossibilities, surprisingly little work has analyzed how this novel political formation *is lived* in spite of, or in fact animated by, the tensions inherent in its achievement. Understanding the life of the Islamic state, as put into practice in Sudan, is the agenda of this book.

THE STATE, OUTSIDE IN

Within the anthropology of Islam, the state has not been a particularly popular topic of inquiry. While a few important exceptions exist (e.g., Agrama 2012; Fernando 2014; Messick 1993; Starrett 1998), the bulk of the anthropological literature on contemporary Islam has instead taken on the public sphere as the central locus in which to determine the nature of Muslim life. In this literature, the public sphere is imagined as a site of free deliberation, the place where one looks for an authentic expression of modern Islam outside of the constraints of the official sphere, identified primarily with the state.<sup>7</sup> At the heart of such an approach are some key assumptions about the nature of the state that this book seeks to disrupt. The state, in this literature, is deemed a realm of artifice and coercion, the expression of raw power, a category of life that is ontologically distinct from the public sphere, not an element or expression of the social but rather its prime adversary. Through an analysis of the way the state is established, experienced, and contested across a diverse spectrum of life in Sudan—from prayer circles to think tanks, from poetic performances to government religious councils—this book will challenge the apotheosis of state sovereignty on which such theories of the public sphere are based. Doing so will allow us to correct the misrecognition of the state as a creature that exists outside the political practice of everyday life.

The bulk of literature on the public sphere in the Muslim world has taken for granted a hard and fast divide between state and civil society, official

7 While what I critique here represents a pervasive trend in conceptualizing the public sphere, it is important to note that there exists a countercurrent of work on Islamic public spheres (e.g., Eisenlohr 2011; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005; Wedeen 2008) that has deeply challenged the Habermasian presuppositions about them that still pervade the majority of studies. I build on this countercurrent in more detail in the following.

domains and the public sphere. Studies of Sudan are no exception. The tendency there has been to see the state as a goliath, inhabited by a different species than the political actors of civil society, despite the recognition that its personnel come from the very same families as the opposition and despite the rapidity with which people fall into and out of state favor (Khalid 1990). In the case of Sudan (and Sudan is not unique, the same could be said about many places) this is of course, in part, a political strategy to deflect some of the embarrassment that surrounds the crimes of the state by insisting that the state is not *of us*. Here again the public sphere is celebrated, used as a proxy for a critique of the state.<sup>8</sup> It is everything the state isn't: free, deliberative, authentic, horizontal.

Despite its interest in elaborating the Muslim public sphere, the literature that has sought to include the Muslim world within the scholarly conversation on the topic has not only drawn on but also complicated some of Habermas's initial assumptions (Habermas 1991). Spearheaded by scholars such as Armando Salvatore (2007; Salvatore and LeVine 2005), Dale Eickelman, Jon Anderson (Eickelman and Anderson 2003), and Nilüfer Göle (Göle and Amman 2006), it has sought simultaneously to rethink the characteristics of the public sphere and to broaden our understanding of who participates in it and how, entering the conversation following the recalibration of Habermas's concept by his critics and interlocutors (Calhoun 1992). For these scholars, there is something unique about "*Islamic public spheres*," in that if we can conjure their existence we can destabilize not only what Nancy Fraser called Habermas's bourgeois presuppositions (Fraser 1992; Salvatore and LeVine 2005)—chief among them secularization—but also the narrative of the public sphere as an achievement of Western capitalist societies more broadly. Salvatore and LeVine explain in one of the edited volumes that serves as a key example of the burst in literature on Islamic public spheres that took place in the first decade of this century:

In seeking to expand the definition of the public sphere, we are cautious not to adopt either a liberal or a republican-jacobian norm. For *shari'a* notions such as *istislah* [which they define as seeking the public good] that are at the heart of Muslim understandings of the public sphere operate from a different orientation than the liberal or Jacobian European frameworks. . . . The resulting public sphere can potentially be seen as a positive-sum game, one that reflects a logic quite distinct from the scarcely plastic—if not zero-sum—notions of social justice based on standards of 'pure reason,' or, at least, from the zeroing

8 I thank Anver Emon of the University of Toronto for lending me this language, which I have borrowed from his article (in preparation) "Codification and Islamic Law: The Ideology behind a Tragic Narrative."

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formal culture—that is, the elision of specific cultural and even legal traditions—that often accompanies Western discourses of ‘the public.’ Such a singular kind of public reason silences other kinds of reason embodied by autonomous social actors, especially those grounded in a religious identity. (Salvatore and LeVine 2005: 2)

Moreover, the kinds of Islamic social movements that make up the new imaginary of the Islamic public sphere—a place for debate over the common good outside the boundaries of the state—are imagined as distinctly “unbounded” from the characteristics of liberal public spheres:

[They are] unbounded by the strictures of liberal norms of publicness premised on atomistic views of the social agent and contractually-based notions of trust, by a strict interpretation of the dichotomy between private and public spheres, and by the ultimate basing of public reason on private interest. What socio-religious discourses and movements primarily base their public reason on is a practical reason sanctified by religious tradition, however variably interpreted. (Salvatore and LeVine 2005: 29)

Interestingly, despite the rather significant difference between the phenomena these scholars observe and that of the Habermasian public sphere, these scholars do not attempt to coin a new term for what they are seeing, but instead seem to think that the premises of the Habermasian concept are similar enough to what they are observing that their inclusion of the latter does not push the term “public sphere” to a breaking point. The reason for this seems to be that, for these scholars, both the bourgeois public sphere and the Islamic public sphere share a certain set of characteristics, ones essential for us to interrogate in any conversation about the state in the Muslim world, premised as they are on a clear notion of being outside of it.

The premises that these authors share coalesce around the type of communicative activity that goes on in the public sphere, which they term “deliberation” (e.g., Habermas 1996). Concepts of the public sphere, whether they emerge from Habermas or the proponents of the Islamic public sphere, seem to gather around this notion, which imbeds within it a certain thesis about the free circulation of such deliberative practices (not to mention a rather unspoken idea of the genre in which such deliberation takes place, what is loosely referred to as “talk”). While for Habermas the public sphere is a unique achievement of democracy, a place where citizens debate what laws best serve them, the literature on the Islamic public sphere does not assume this particular political order (or assumes that people can debate the common good in a whole host of political systems). Nonetheless, Habermas’s foundational assumption about the public sphere, namely, that “[c]itizens behave as a public body when they confer in an *unrestricted* fashion—that

is with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest” (Habermas 1974: 49), remains central to these conceptions of the public sphere as well. Restrictions, discipline, authority: these are the conceptual enemies of the public sphere, whether Islamic or bourgeois. Too much of any of them and we risk losing the public sphere entirely, ending up in the realm of coercion, state totalitarianism, or worse. The public sphere for these thinkers has little place for the extension, the embodiment, or the production of authority; it is instead always an arena for the challenging of authority, which serves to increase individuals’ capacity to gather and maintain voice. This is a voice that is understood to be the expression of their full and unfettered moral core, whether or not that core is idiomized or even limited by the discursive tradition of which these individuals are a part. The celebration of new media and new technologies of circulation in recent literatures has only highlighted the analytical importance of the deliberative character of the public sphere, as these tools are understood as the technical means that make possible this sort of deliberative space, leading to what these scholars maintain is an effervescence in the democratization of Islamic authority.<sup>9</sup>

In this regard, as a space of free deliberation and for challenging authority, the public sphere is always pictured as being outside of the state. Habermas writes:

Although state authority is so to speak the executor of the political public sphere, it is not a part of it. . . . The expression of ‘public opinion’ refers to the tasks of criticism and control which a public body of citizens informally—and, in periodic elections, formally as well—practices *vis-à-vis* the ruling structure organized in the form of a state. . . . The public sphere as a sphere which *mediates between society and state*, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer or [*sic*] public opinion, accords with the principle of the public sphere—that principle of public information which once had to be fought for against arcane policies

9 One example of such a trend is found in the work of Jon Anderson, who observes:

For well over a generation, the public sphere of Islam has been an arena of contest in which activists and militants brought forth *challenges to traditional interpretative practices* and authority to speak for Islam, especially to articulate its social interests and political agendas. . . . [T]heir claims draw on social and political experience as *alternatives* both to expertise in textual hermeneutics associated with the learned men of Islam (*ulema*) and to more illuminationist priorities exemplified in Sufi and generally mystical ways. Opening the social field to *new spokespeople* and *new discursive practices* not only *challenges authority* long since thought settled to interpret what religion requires, but also blurs boundaries between public and private discourse and fosters new habits of production and consumption tied to media and particularly to new media. (Anderson 2003: 887, my emphasis)

of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities. (Habermas 1974: 49–50, my emphasis)

This deeply utopian democratic ideal of the public sphere as outside of the state permeates the literature on the Islamic public sphere as well, despite the fact that the empirical context in which such studies take place can often hardly be characterized as democratic, and thus the kind of mediation Habermas expects (or the democratic control of state activities) cannot be taken for granted. As anthropologist Jon Anderson has written: “As much as the public/private distinction introduced into the anthropology of the Middle East, South Asia, and Muslim world generally opened previously private realms of experience and expression, it is the public sphere, *separate from domestic and from formal structures of authority*, that needs thick description now” (Anderson 2003: 901, my emphasis).

For these authors, the public sphere is manifestly located outside the state and formal structures of authority in general. But where, one must ask, is the state’s outside—not only in authoritarian contexts such as Sudan, where it is hard to escape the material context of the state no matter where one goes, but for all modern states given what we know about the workings of governmentality, from biopolitics (e.g., Foucault 2010) to the “state effect” (Mitchell 1991: 2006)? If we take the conclusions of this literature seriously, it becomes exceedingly difficult to imagine a conceptual (or actual) “outside of the state” where a distinct public sphere supposedly resides. For Mitchell, for example, what he calls “the state effect” is that “which arises from techniques that enable mundane material practices to take on the appearance of an abstract, nonmaterial form [here the state],” the ability to abstract power being itself “the distinctive technique of the modern political order” (Mitchell 2006: 170).<sup>10</sup> Like civil society, the state too is a conglomeration of human actors, whose distinct claims to sovereignty we have perhaps given more analytical credit than is due. Nevertheless, Mitchell reminds us that though the distinction between state and civil society may in some sense be a false one, “the elusiveness of the state-society boundary needs to be taken seriously, not as a problem of conceptual precision but as a clue to the nature of the phenomenon. Rather than searching for a definition that will fix

10 Begoña Aretxaga’s extremely helpful review of the ethnographic literature of the state quotes two classic, but still relevant, articulations of this idea. For A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, the state “is usually represented as an entity over and above the human individuals that make up a society, having as one of its attributes something called ‘sovereignty,’ and sometimes spoken of as having a will . . . or as issuing commands. [Yet] the State in this sense does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is a fiction of the philosophers” (Aretxaga 2003: 400); or as reframed by sociologist Philip Abrams, “The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is” (Aretxaga 2003: 400; see also Aretxaga 2005).

the boundary, we need to examine the detailed process through which the uncertain yet powerful distinction between state and society [i.e., the state effect] is produced” (Mitchell 1991: 78). He argues then “that the task of a critique of the state is not just to reject such metaphysics, but to explain how it has been possible to produce this practical effect, so characteristic of the modern political order” (Mitchell 2006: 176). Understanding how this “structural effect”—that is, the ability of the state to appear “as an apparatus that stands apart from the rest of the social world” (2006: 180)—takes place (or, in other words, how the man behind the curtain becomes the Wizard of Oz, despite his mundanity)<sup>11</sup> is key to understanding how modern power works. For Mitchell, despite its constructedness, “[t]he state cannot be dismissed as an abstraction or ideological construct and passed over in favor of more real, material realities” (2006: 184).

I adopt such an approach to the state here, one that looks at it less as an institutional “site” and more as the effect of a series of processes that produce a novel form of modern power that is, however, no less real: a leviathan who is neither human nor entirely divorced from our collective will. It is the materiality of the state, which I observed through its effects in everyday life everywhere I went in Sudan, and this precisely at the moment of its displacement from the institutional bases in which it traditionally resides, that inspired me to write this book. The state, as a “social subject in everyday life” (Aretxaga 2003: 395), and the varying ways in which it has structured Sudanese life and in which Sudanese have come to terms with it, is the focus of the chapters that follow. Through the means of ethnography we are able not only to view this everyday life, to see the state from the bottom up, but to dissolve fantasies of its unity, to disaggregate the state into its constituent parts, which do not always act in concert (Sharma and Gupta 2006: 10–11). Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta put it this way: “Once we see that the boundary between the state and civil society is itself an effect of power, then we can begin to conceptualize ‘the state’ *within* (and not automatically distinct from) other institutional forms through which social relations are lived, such as the family, civil society, and the economy [or, in my case, religious life]” (Sharma and Gupta 2006: 9).<sup>12</sup> In the example of Sudan, where the government came to power through a coup, the regime explicitly muddied the boundary between state and society in order to make itself seem less

11 As the Wizard famously exclaimed, “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWyCCJ6B2WE>.

12 This sentiment is echoed in the work of Yael Navaro-Yashin: “There is an attempt to base this distinction [between state and civil society] empirically on historical and social grounds, as if the state and society were tangible things to be pinpointed and distinguished objectively from one another. The following questions, however, ought to be asked: where does the state end and society begin? Could one ever locate such division empirically?” (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 134).

foreign, a process that eventually led to its instability, as we will soon learn. Such a phenomenon has often been hard to detect, however, given that the essential otherness of the state has been upheld by many in civil society in order to maintain comfortable distance from the regime.

By rejecting the impenetrability of the boundary between state and civil society, official realms and the public sphere, this book also challenges presuppositions of the public sphere as necessarily a place where only free deliberation occurs, where traditional authority is challenged, where discourse takes place solely in the medium of talk. We will see that, in fact, public spheres are also very much the spaces of discipline (Hirschkind 2006: 105–8).<sup>13</sup> They are spaces that rely on (and reproduce) both traditional *and* state authority as much as they challenge them; and they not only make use of other sorts of communicative genres besides talk, but also do much more than merely communicate ideas to their participants, as Chapter 4 of this book on the affective training of Sudanese citizens shows. The social is not, then, an organic phenomenon that stands up to the artifice of the state, but is itself the place where the state is reproduced through a reiteration of the rules for membership in political society (Stevens 1999). Such a recognition of the circulation of power in public spheres should not be read gloomily, as a comment restricted to Africa or the Islamic world, nor as marking the end of the kind of deliberation we tend to see as central for the health of public spheres. Rather, it is an appreciation that the presence of the state, and of its disciplining techniques, can be located all across what we have come to call the public sphere. Recognizing this does not imply the end of agency, but rather appreciates the way in which the capacity for agency often comes within a roster of submissions, within a regime of discipline that makes meaningful action possible (Foucault 1990, 1997; Mahmood 2005: 27–29). Reading public spheres through this lens, rather than the one that sees them as outside of official bearers of authority, mobilized only in the challenging of that authority, helps us to understand how power circulates not only in Sudan, but in modern societies more generally.

13 Hirschkind takes works on the public sphere such as those I mention to task for assuming that the sphere of deliberation opened up by mass education and the modern public sphere is somehow free of the disciplinary constraints that characterized periods wherein knowledge was said to be monopolized by an entrenched scholarly elite. He writes that such approaches to the public “sustain this fiction of a purely self-organizing discourse . . . [by building] in a structural blindness to the material conditions of the discourses it produces and circulates, as well as to the pragmatics of its speech forms: the genres, stylistic elements, citational resources, gestural codes, and so on that make a discourse intelligible to specific people, inhabiting certain conditions of knowledge and learning” (Hirschkind 2006: 106). It is these material contexts and pragmatic codes that are the focus of this book. However, while Hirschkind’s “counterpublics” exist in “disjunctive relationship to the public sphere of the nation and its media instruments” (2006: 117), the publics I am studying are deeply intertwined with state logics.

Chapters 1 and 2, which make up the section of this book I am calling “Interventions,” look at the state from the inside out, tracing how the state-based political class, in both its colonial origins and in its postcolonial present, sought to shape Islam by means of official policies. Inspired by recent works in the ethnography of the state, such as those that I have cited above, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 (the section of the book I am calling “Itineraries”) bring what scholars have understood as the state’s outside (the public sphere, civil society, the individual) *into* a discussion of the state, explaining how the aspiration for an Islamic political order is lived in these domains. By examining the presence of the state in those spaces that scholars often situate as discursive outsides to it, I hope to question our fetishizing allegiance to state sovereignty, exploring the state as yet another function of our shared political life and not the distant goliath it is often misrecognized to be.

WHEN THE STATE IS EVERYWHERE (OR, RECONCEIVING  
THE ISLAMIC PUBLIC SPHERE)

When the National Islamic Front came to power in a bloodless coup in Sudan in June of 1989, it promised not only to install new modes of governance but to reform Sudanese society at large. Proclaiming its movement the “Revolution of National Salvation” (*thawrat al-inqādh al-waṭani*), what came to be called (sometimes pridefully, sometimes scornfully) the “Salvation (*inqādh*) regime” sought to reconstruct Sudanese civilization individual by individual, fusing personal piety and political commitment into an often-unstable whole. The title of my book is derived from a nationalist anthem released by a state-affiliated radio station that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. The anthem, like the Salvation regime itself, sought to lay claim to the Islamic identity of the state and to conceive of the state as a political form for the development of an Islamic way of life that could meet the challenges of modernity. Yet, creating a community that not only submitted to the Islamic state but that desired it, that loved the Prophet so much that it would willingly seek to organize its political order on the model he bequeathed to humanity, was a difficult process. For love of the Prophet meant different things to different people: from fighting the *jihād* in the South (de Waal and Abdel Salam 2004) to creating the material conditions that would make possible a nation constantly in prayer (see Chapters 3 and 4). By justifying political participation on the basis of piety and by proposing that the desired end of political participation was a closeness to God and his prophet, the regime became vulnerable to rival claims. The functionaries of the state could not be the only legitimate owners of political sovereignty if they themselves saw sovereignty as deriving solely from one’s relationship

to God, since closeness to God was a status many claimed, from the *awliyā'* (saints) to the '*ulamā'* (scholars).

And yet, despite this instability built into the Islamic state, there was a way in which the equation of political legitimacy with Islam meant not only the amorphousness of political power (because it could potentially reside anywhere "Islam" was found and not just in the formal state), but also the ubiquity of the state. Even at a time when the power of state institutions was receding in a landscape of international governance, the state, and in particular the Islamic state, came to be undeniable social fact. As Abdelwahab El-Affendi wrote of the situation in the mid-1980s:

The language that the *Ikhwan* kept speaking in relative solitude [turned] into the language of the majority and even *Ikhwan* opponents started citing the classical Islamic texts. The prevailing atmosphere favoured the Islamists and a great number of secularist (and even left-wing) intellectuals started announcing their conversion to the path of Islam. . . . [The "anti-Islamization camp's"] weakness was [its] inability to state its case more clearly. As even the communists and Christians persisted in speaking of the "true spirit of Islam," their very discourse helped the Islamists maintain their grip on the political agenda. (El-Affendi 1991: 124, 136)

Indeed, while true in the mid-1980s, by the time of the "Salvation Revolution" the language of political discourse had irreversibly become an Islamic one, upheld both by the Islamists and their opponents. This is a process that has only solidified in the intervening years.

In an interview I conducted with a former Communist in which he explained his recent joining of a leftist Sufi movement, I saw in clear relief the staying-power of the Islamic state as a political ideal, appreciated even by staunch opponents of the regime. He recalled to me:

The fact that [the Communists did not resist after the Islamist revolution] did not simply effect a political change in me. It effected a major personal change in me, in my lack of confidence in the leadership of the Sudanese Communist Party, to be frank. I mean in relationship to their responsibility as fighters (*munādilīn*) of the first degree. Because of [their guidance] we had become apostates to religion (*fī sabīlīhum kaffarnā bi-l-dīn*). I was not an apostate to religion because I don't believe in it, but rather I was searching for the proper tools to bring about justice. . . . There is no [other] reason that I would be against the sound natural inclination of the masses, of the majority of all our people [in Sudan], which is mostly the Islamic religion. [But after joining the Communists] I was capable of sacrificing anything to implement justice. And on the other hand, I was thinking that the Muslim Brotherhood

and other Islamic organizations do not represent Islam anyhow. In fact it was the opposite: they represent a parasitic (*tufayliyya*) capitalism. This is the reason that I paid attention to the [Communists]. But when [a group] doesn't have desire to realize the social revolution [which they talk so much about, by seizing the opportunity that the knowledge of the coming Salvation Revolution afforded], so how will they make it real? If the Communist Party was wrong or not able [to implement social justice, I thought that] I must then see what tools, in fact, are appropriate.

Such sentiments are not atypical of how politics had come to be imagined by the turn of the twenty-first century for many: what mattered was no longer choosing between Islam or secularism, but determining what kind of Islamic expression would best bring justice and peace to this long-suffering nation. Even for opposition members, the Islamic state was becoming less and less a deniable reality. They might reject the government in power and its vision of Islam, but the fact that there was and would remain a religious basis to the organization of governance and society became harder and harder to dispute.<sup>14</sup> As Yael Navaro-Yashin has written, "If the political survives critique and deconstruction, if the state endures, as it has, then the anthropologist must venture [into] other arenas and analytical frameworks for the study of the political. For the people who critique the state also reproduce it through their 'fantasies' for the state" (2002: 4). It is in this sense that, in Sudan, the Islamic state was truly everywhere, not merely as the encroachment of formal institutions of the Inqadh government into various sectors of life, but rather as the growing coherence of a political commitment to an Islamic political order to which individuals of a variety of political persuasions aspired, despite their multiple definitions thereof.<sup>15</sup>

The robust presence of the Islamic state in the political imaginary, even in a period in which its institutional instantiations were increasingly occupied by the liberal logics (and actual representatives) of international development and aid, created not only a conceptual dilemma for me but an empirical one as well. The individuals with whom I interacted and whose organizations I studied were often hard to locate: were they situated inside

14 Such an observation should not discount the importance of secularist movements in Sudan such as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), yet they are not the subject of this book.

15 It was in this sense that many would say to me, "No matter what one thinks about the Inqadh, no matter their corruption and disingenuousness, they have to be given credit for bringing *shari'a* to Sudan." (Note that despite the fact that the adoption of *shari'a* predates the 1989 coup by six years [as it was put in place by President Ja'far Numayri during his 1981–85 Islamization phase], the inqadh government and the National Islamic Front party that preceded it are credited by most as both inspiring and sedimenting *shari'a* in Sudan).

or outside of the state? One example is the Sudanese Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahim Muhammad Waqī‘ Allah, known as al-Bura‘ī, whom you will meet on several occasions throughout the pages of this book. Al-Bura‘ī was the kind of shaykh at whose *masīd*<sup>16</sup> one would find both regime figures and members of the opposition. This was not because he was apolitical, embracing all Sudanese (as his followers often presented him).<sup>17</sup> The reason instead was that, like me, Sudanese had trouble classifying him, or rather found ample evidence to classify him as either a supporter of or an alternative to the regime.

Al-Bura‘ī was among the twenty-first-century Sudanese shaykhs and poets who benefited most from the Islamist coup of 1989. This was true both due to his direct access to media channels established by the regime and, more indirectly, to the way in which shaykhs like him became the beneficiaries of those looking to answer religious questions provoked by the state. Moreover, the massive population shifts that took place in the final decades of the twentieth century, as a result of the war the regime waged, served as the material path to his success. The distinctive shape of his life, from obscurity to superstardom, could not have occurred in any other era, as his name and fame were carried from his home in the vast deserts of Northern Kordofan to the capital by people from western Sudan who had migrated as a result of war, famine, and underdevelopment. Indeed, for this reason, this first and paramount media shaykh of the twenty-first century can be understood as a product, likely unintended, of the regime’s military and urbanization programs. His popularity was further cemented by his ability to fulfill a kind of pastoral longing expressed by many Sudanese who had left the “simple life” of the village for the ravages of the city (al-Buni and

16 The term *masīd* likely derives from the Arabic *sayyid* (respected or holy man) and is akin to something like “the place of the holy man,” and thus is not a bastardization of *masjid*, as is often assumed. (It took an Iraqi scholar, Omar Dewachi, to destabilize this Sudanist truism, and I thank him for pointing it out to me.) The word refers to a Sufi compound for retreat, study, and worship, which indeed is usually occupied by a great shaykh, his descendants, and the tombs of his forefathers.

17 His biographer, ‘Abd al-Rahim Hajj Ahmad (2006b), concurs with the understanding that al-Bura‘ī was putting forward an Islam that was apolitical. The author tells the story of when he composed a poem praising the regime that he wanted to deliver on the occasion of a visit of President ‘Umar al-Bashir to al-Bura‘ī’s village of al-Zariba, and how al-Bura‘ī told him that if he wanted to write praise poetry (*madīh*) he should praise the Prophet instead (2006b: 68–69). Hajj Ahmad depicts al-Bura‘ī as at any given time having a circle of people who surrounded him, among whom there would be a member of the Democratic Union Party (*Ittihādī*), a member of the Umma Party (*Anṣārī*), an Islamist (*Islāmī*), a Communist (*Shiyu‘ī*), and even a member of the adamantly anti-Sufi Ansar al-Sunna. Hajj Ahmad commented that al-Bura‘ī unified them despite their political views being so divergent (Hajj Ahmad 2006b: 65). Further, the author presents al-Bura‘ī as scrupulous in avoiding gifts from politicians and commanding his followers to ask nothing of them. For more details on al-Bura‘ī’s relationship to politics see Salomon 2010.

Sa'īd 2000). And it was the media tools and networks of the urban space his poetry now occupied that quite literally enabled his immense popularity. The programs he supported, from group marriage to discouraging alcohol and excessive mourning (Hajj Ahmad 2006b: 28, 59, 61–63), were those the regime supported. He was celebrated on their radio and television stations; his poetry framed their events.

Al-Bura'ī represented a paradox: both sedimenting the values that the regime sought to spread in its Civilization Project (*al-mashrū' al-ḥaḍārī*, Chapter 2), while at the same time offering an alternative locus of spiritual power (Chapter 5) and a thinly veiled critique of the modernist variety of Islam and its accouterments that the regime supported (Chapter 4). Both enabled by state media projects and critical of the kinds of piety they represented, al-Bura'ī's work is evidence of the difficulty involved in conceiving of the public sphere as either inside or outside of the state. His fame was built on the architecture of the state, while his poetry simultaneously sought to destabilize the new moral geography the state presented. Instead, he claimed a much older vision that valorized the quiet rhythms of rural life, the *khalwa* (retreat) that has long been at the center of Islamic practice in Sudan. The public sphere that al-Bura'ī represented was thus both of the state—contributing to its agenda of using the aesthetic and ritual form of *madīh* to facilitate national Islamization—yet not reducible to it. The lines between the state and the public sphere were not easy to draw.

Moreover, the fact that the particular Islamic public sphere al-Bura'ī represents (one, of course, of many extant in Sudan) spoke in verse, rather than in the untheorized “talk” that characterizes the Habermasian public sphere, should not go unrecognized. In Chapter 4, I will present a full discussion of the distinctness of the communicative genre of poetry, and, in this case, of poetry accompanied by music. The transportability of poetry, both before and after recorded technology—the former due to its mnemonic characteristics and the latter to its ability to be heard by a wide public as a background substrate to any number of daily activities—meant that this genre reached different sorts of publics than did other forms of Islamic public criticism. Moreover, the tonal, affective, and even kinesthetic repertoire that accompanied these *madīh* had both communicative functions and an ability to inculcate certain kinds of pious virtues (Hirschkind 2006). Thus, what went on in this public sphere was not merely reasoned debate about the common good, but the actual shaping of good subjects through listening practices associated with *madīh*.

The public sphere of which al-Bura'ī was a part is both a space in which deliberation about and inculcation of the common good took place *and* a context organized by the state; it both reproduces state norms and rethinks them; it is both established by the state and seeks to undo many of the state's basic premises; it both challenges state adversaries and enables them. For

this reason, it is problematic to think of the public sphere as either outside of the state or as a realm of unfettered deliberation. Moreover, the specificity of the genre of communication and performance that goes on in the public spheres I study exposes the provincialism of “talk” and calls attention to the unique characteristics of other modes of expression that both communicate ideas and form new kinds of pious subjects. This recognition raises the need, if not to look for a new term of reference beyond the “Islamic public sphere,” then at least to rethink the concept, taking into account both the practices of deliberation and discipline that constitute it, as well as its inextricable intertwining with the state.

STATE OF CONFLICT, STATE OF GRACE: NEW MODELS  
FOR THE STUDY OF SUDAN

Regardless of its insides and outsides, its ubiquities or paucities, what the Sudanese state is most known for (at least in its current instantiation) is its fluent and brutal use of violence as a means of addressing the intractable problems it inherited from previous regimes. This reputation is not unfounded. The Sudanese government is perhaps not unique in its brutality, but it is prolific in it. From intensifying a war in the South for over a decade before eventually calculating a conclusion to it, to initiating a brutal “counter-insurgency on the cheap” (de Waal 2004) in Darfur that led to the massacre of an unknown multitude of civilians, to perpetuating a more recent war in the new South that has seen little distinction between non-combatant and soldier, this is a regime whose actions cannot be excused or explained away.

When I have delivered bits and pieces of this book as lectures or conference papers, almost invariably someone stands up with a perplexed look on his or her face and asks a pointed question. How does the Sudan I am describing in my work—one characterized by a robust culture of theological debate, by art and poetry, by intellectual exchange, creativity, and perseverance—mesh with the Sudan one hears about daily on the news, a place of war (or even genocide), religious fanaticism, poverty, and famine? The question is of course a valid and important one. I have also written on the civil war (Salomon 2004b, 2011), as well as national partition, and South Sudan’s independence (Salomon 2013, 2014, 2015a), and I would not want to give the impression that what I describe here of my everyday experience in Khartoum, Kordofan, and Sinnar states (where I conducted the bulk of the research for this book) is divorced from the Sudan one hears about on the daily news. In fact these two stories are intricately intertwined. While in the more peaceful parts of Sudan one can lazily forget the misery hundreds of miles away (or even on the outskirts of Khartoum), it takes little searching

to realize that the political situation in which Sudan found itself in the years bookended by the end of the North-South civil war and national partition, when I did the bulk of my fieldwork, weighed heavily on all aspects of life.

Sudan is a country in constant turmoil. Political instability, war, displacement, drought, and famine have afflicted the Republic of Sudan without respite for nearly the entire span of its sixty-year history. Since independence in 1956, the country has had eight constitutions, experienced five successful coups (and several more attempted coups), and witnessed two large-scale civil wars with the South and armed rebellion in the North, East, South, and West, as well as several famines and droughts that led to massive death and displacement. Further, in addition to having been one of the world's largest producers of refugees (war-afflicted, political, environmental, and economic), Sudan also has been one of the world's largest *recipients* of refugees, opening its borders to those escaping conflicts in Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Congo and Uganda, Chad and the Central African Republic. Despite the temporary boom in development due to the exploitation of oil reserves (Tisdal 2008), Sudan remains an extremely poor country, ranking 167th on the UNDP's Human Development Index of 2015, only twenty countries from the bottom.<sup>18</sup> In the time I lived in Sudan, I witnessed both the conclusion to the latest twenty-two-year chapter in the Sudanese civil war between North and South (at the time the longest-running civil war in the world) and the outbreak of massive new civil conflict in the western Darfur region,<sup>19</sup> a situation that brought massive international attention (and intervention) to a country that had previously been of marginal interest to international public opinion.<sup>20</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of writing on independent Sudan has concentrated on these troubling events. Questions of conflict and peace, famine and drought, refugees and resettlement, treaties made and violated, the formation of successive governments and the intricacies of their successes and ultimate failures have been the focus of most of these studies.<sup>21</sup> While such works are crucial both to understanding Sudan and to thinking through possible solutions to its troubles, what has been neglected in this process is a sustained focus on the complex and intricate textures of the lives of individual Sudanese who have lived through these decades of political turmoil, particularly in more recent years. We are missing a key component to understanding Sudan (and potential solutions to its problems)

18 [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr\\_2015\\_statistical\\_annex.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr_2015_statistical_annex.pdf).

19 A whole host of publications have come out on the Darfur conflict. Five volumes strike me as particularly useful: Flint and de Waal 2008, Hassan and Ray 2009, de Waal 2007, Daly 2010, and Mamdani 2009.

20 See Aidi 2005 for a persuasive account of why the conflict received so much attention in the US while other brutal African wars were virtually ignored.

21 See Johnson 2004 for a good summary of this literature.

when we pay attention only to the vagaries of macropolitics and ignore the intricacies of the cultural and religious life that goes on in their midst. In this regard, and perhaps most crucially, if book after book has blamed the woes of the contemporary period, at least in part, on the Islamization of the state that occurred after the rise to power in 1989 of the National Islamic Front government (NIF, *al-jabha al-islāmiyya al-qawmiyya*) and its rejection by diverse sectors of the Sudanese public (Idris 2005; Jok 2007), then it would do us well as scholars to provide a thicker description of what these policies meant to those who lived through them: how they were consumed and reworked by diverse publics on the ground. When we do so, we find that, in spite of state attempts at silencing opposition by any means necessary, a vast conversation is taking place in the space opened up by NIF political reforms, a conversation in which a variety of Muslim and non-Muslim actors participate that regrettably has been ignored by local and international policy makers alike.

This book offers an ethnographic study of the Sudanese experience with the Islamic state from its revolutionary establishment in 1989 to the present, with a particular focus on the years of National Unity, 2005–11, when I lived in Sudan for a prolonged period of time. The period of National Unity between the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), representing the South, was particularly interesting because it constituted perhaps the first time since coming to power that the Islamists were compelled to grapple with religious pluralism as they sought to construct a state that did not give up on its Islamic aspirations, but might also appeal to non-Muslims. The project was unsuccessful to the extent that the SPLM came to argue that unity was not made attractive and in that its majority non-Muslim constituency voted overwhelming for secession, which occurred in 2011. But in terms of consolidating the Islamic state, one might argue that it was eminently successful, as the current regime remained in power even through these transitions, and Islamic political organizations that called for such a political model (albeit often in forms different from those the regime offered) seemed to gain strength and multiply following secession.

While a few important exceptions exist that will be discussed in more detail in the following (e.g., Nageeb 2004; Seesemann 2007; Willemse 2007), there have been few ethnographic attempts to study the changing manifestations of Sudanese Islamic modernity since Abdou Maliqalim Simone's (1994) and Victoria Bernal's (1994, 1997) important studies, fieldwork for which was undertaken in the very different political climate of the 1980s. Moreover, the majority of recent work on the Sudanese state (e.g., Collins and Burr 2003; Gallab 2008, 2014) has bequeathed to us a picture of Islamism in Sudan that focuses only on the official written policies of the ruling party, with very little attention to how Sudanese Islam was changing

under the long shadows cast by these political developments.<sup>22</sup> Such a limited view obscures the fact that a variety of other Islamic forces exist in Sudan that have acted both in cooperation and conflict with the Islamic vision (and its subsequent rethinking) promoted by the ruling party. In neglecting the varieties of activist Islam in contemporary Sudan, scholars of Sudan have ignored the essential tension that lies at the heart of what they have termed the “Islamic revival”: namely, that it encompasses not only an argument about what constitutes a proper society and a proper Muslim believer, but also about what constitutes Islam itself. It is this debate over the nature of modern Islam in Sudan—its epistemology (Chapter 3), its aesthetics (Chapter 4), and, finally, its politics (Chapter 5)—enabled by the changes brought about by the state, that will be the focus of the chapters that make up the heart of this book.

It is my hope that this book will make a significant intervention into the study of Sudan, a country not only of long-standing importance to scholarship, but also of great policy concern to the West, indeed one of the few African nations consistently in the headlines. Recent works on Sudan that have focused primarily on the architecture of conflict and the resulting situation of poverty and underdevelopment are of course crucial for our understanding of life in Sudan. But if we hope not only to understand Sudan’s problems, but also to discover how Sudanese and their international partners might move forward from them, we cannot overlook Sudan’s many resources. Such writings too often ignore the ingenuity of daily life, the intellectual and social production that goes on even in situations of extreme repression, and even in contexts that cannot be easily untangled from the state. They fail to listen to the people—their philosophies of life, their visions of the good, their dreams for the future—on whom, at least in part, the future of Sudan must be built. This tendency to focus on the political wranglings of the elite to the neglect of the great wealth of knowledge in other sectors is arguably one of the reasons that international engagements with Sudan have been such predictable failures. By exploring everyday efforts to maintain a social and political order inspired by an Islamic normative framework, under the challenges posed both by the horrors of war and the complexities of national unity, my work seeks to broaden our understanding of “ordinary ethics” (Lambek 2010) and their consequences in countries in and emerging from conflict. Building on other efforts in Sudanese ethnography (e.g., Bernal 1997; Boddy 1989; Kenyon 2012; Nageeb 2004; Seesemann 2007; Simone 1994) and intellectual history (El-Affendi 1991), as well as on critical approaches to the study of Muslim Africa more broadly (Saul 2006; Seesemann

22 One exception to this is chapter 6 of Fluehr-Lobban 2012, which offers an interesting discussion of some of the social transformations wrought by Islamization around issues of marriage and sexuality.

2006), this book aims to put Sudanese interlocutors into conversation with key works on the place of Islam in the future of the African continent.

#### THE IMPOSSIBLE STATE MADE POSSIBLE

Countless works have analyzed the nature of the liberal state, the neo-liberal state, the democratic state, and the authoritarian state. But how can we characterize *the Islamic state* as a modern political form? What makes it so attractive to Muslim intellectuals? And, most importantly, how does it function in our modern world, combining a nineteenth-century European political form, imposed on the Muslim world through colonialism, with a system of political and religious thought evolving from the seventh century onwards? Wael Hallaq's recent monograph *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics and Modernity's Moral Predicament* offers one potential answer to these questions. There he argues for the incompatibility of Islam, as a mode of subjectivation and governance, with the modern state. Where the former enshrines moral autonomy and a robust rule of law (a law outside of politics in the true sense), the latter is positivistic, its metaphysic "resid[ing] within its own boundaries as sovereign will" (2013: 157). While the former is interested in a project of moral retrieval, the latter has primarily rationalistic and materialistic concerns.<sup>23</sup> Though Hallaq relies on a massive telescoping through history and geography of both modern states and Islamic governance to arrive at these paradigms, his more general point is well taken: Islam and the modern state represent two incommensurable modes of governance and moral authority. It is for this reason that he calls the Islamic state an impossible state; it is a contradiction in terms. His argument is premised on his earlier work (Hallaq 2009), which traces the evisceration of *sharī'a* by the colonial state, not only through processes of codification that limit its pluralism and interpretive flexibility, but also through attempts to shoehorn *sharī'a* into a Western legal framework, thus isolating it from the larger regime of moral rearing (including ritual law) of which it was once an organic part. Outlining the key components of the modern state—from its abstract sovereignty (2013: 25–28) to its bureaucratic machinery (31–33)—Hallaq contends that the state is not a neutral vessel into which Islamists can simply pour their aspirations (155). Citing McLuhan (1964), one might say that for

23 Hallaq: "Whereas the Muslim subject strives for moral improvement, the state's subject strives to fulfill sovereign will, fictitiously a representation of the will of the commanding sovereign. The difference is a paradigmatic one between a continuous and unending moral struggle for the Ought and a continuous and unending worldly struggle for the Is. The subject of Is and the subject of Ought are two drastically different human subjects. They stand not only in diametrical opposition but in irreconcilable contradiction" (2013: 160–61).

Hallaq “the medium is the message.” The state is in fact a rival moral order to Islam: “It comes with its own arsenal of metaphysics and much else. It *inherently* produces certain distinctive effects that are political, social, economic, cultural, epistemic, and, no less, psychological; which is to say that the state fashions particular knowledge systems that in turn determine and shape the landscape of individual and collective subjectivity and thus much of the meaning of its subjects’ lives” (Hallaq 2013: 155–56).

Yet, incompatible as Islam and the modern state might be in their ideals, the Islamic state is a phenomenon that has come to exist in our world in spite of the tensions that Hallaq identifies. Not only this, but for Islamists—from ISIS to the Sudanese regime (despite their vastly different readings of the Islamic state)—the state form is not at all incidental to their goals. The ability of the state to assume its unique mode of power—through its abstract sovereignty, its bureaucracy, its monopoly over legislation, law and violence, and its cultural hegemony (Hallaq 2013: 19–36)—are precisely the elements that make Islamic statehood attractive to those who claim it. This is perhaps not obvious in theoretical formulations of the Islamic state (Belkeziz 2009; Brown 2000; Qutb 1953), where the state form itself is rarely elaborated, but it becomes clear in any attempt to examine how the Islamic state comes to fruition and how it makes use of the apparatus it has inherited from the colonial regime and previous postcolonial endeavors. Chapter 1 of this book will trace the establishment of the modern state in Sudan in the colonial period, according particular attention to how it attempted to undo the Islamic order that preceded it, the Mahdiyya. Chapter 2 will examine precisely how the Sudanese regime drew on the legacy of the Mahdiyya, the intellectual resources of the Islamic movement that it had built since the 1950s, *and* the political form of the colonial state to craft its unique mode of governance; in other words, how it attempted to make Hallaq’s impossible possible. The remaining chapters will trace the life of this state, observing how both its mechanisms and its ideals have come to structure Sudanese society. These chapters serve as evidence that the Islamists in charge of the Sudanese state did not see that state as an empty vessel, but rather quite skillfully used its very characteristics (from its abstract sovereignty to its bureaucratic machinery) to propagate their vision. What are we to make of Hallaq’s *impossible state* when it in fact becomes a practical possibility?

Despite the attractiveness of Hallaq’s analysis of both the modern state and of Islamic law and governance, his conclusions about their incommensurability become increasingly difficult to uphold as they rely on a vision of both Islam and the state that seems to lie outside of history. As Hussein Agrama writes in his study of Islamic law within the Egyptian state, perhaps implicitly critiquing work like that of Hallaq, “The idea that muftis directly access the Islamic tradition, while judges do not because of a code, comes close to saying that the *Shari‘a* has a traditional essence to which

legal codification—a mark of modern law—will always be alien. Yet this idea of a traditional essence fundamentally alien to modern innovation is hard to sustain, both conceptually and historically” (2012: 128). Agrama’s discussion of what happens to the *sharīʿa* in the modern state provides a unique intervention into the literature on the subject. Though Agrama offers a careful and sophisticated account of the techniques of moral inquiry and the sedimentation of virtues particular to the classical *sharīʿa* system that are lost through the restructuring of *sharīʿa* under civil law (2012: 54–55, 57), he does not thereby conclude that *sharīʿa* is lost in the modern state. Rather than offering a eulogy for an ideal *sharīʿa*, Agrama tells us about its transformation, along the way providing a careful appraisal of how modern legal subjects in Egypt are formed at the intersection of the liberal rule of law and Islamic jurisprudence. In describing how this happens, Agrama moves away from more speculative conclusions about the death of *sharīʿa*, showing precisely what becomes of it in the modern state and under the secular logics to which it has come to subscribe.

It is the goal of this book to unpack the political form of the Islamic state, exploring it in practice and from the ground up. While previous studies of Sudan have explored the vagaries of political developments in the period of Islamization (Collins and Burr 2003; Gallab 2008, 2011, 2014; Sidahmed 1996), freezing in print what has been rather ephemeral on the ground, this book will depict the character of the Islamic state as it appears in daily life, examining the lasting effects of state Islamization on Sudanese society through a study of the individuals and organizations that function in its midst. Presenting for analysis the results of several years of fieldwork in both urban and rural Sudan, the following pages will explore how, at the outset of a period that eventually brought about the dissolution of the country, a rapidly shifting historical context gave rise to a variety of answers to the question of the place of Muslim piety in the nation’s future. The process of trial and error that produced these answers provides extremely valuable data not only for those who study Sudan, but also for scholars of public religion more broadly, not least for those interested in the fate of countries that are grappling with applied Islamic politics of the kind that Sudan has been experimenting with since its Islamist revolution of 1989. Though this book certainly does discuss *an* Islamic state, and a particularly unique one at that, my interest is in using this Sudanese example to make some broader observations about the political form of *the* Islamic state, which has become an increasingly popular one in the second decade of the twenty-first century, despite its purported impossibilities. How can we use the experience of Sudan to understand this influential paradigm, its accomplishments, and its challenges? The heart of this book provides the data needed to begin to answer this question. Its epilogue makes some speculative inquiries into the future of Islamic states in our fraught present

and explores as well the difficulties presented by two recent attempts to transcend their problems.

Though it has taken the violence and bombast of ISIS for analysts to begin to take the idea of the Islamic state seriously as a mode of contemporary Muslim expression, twenty-five years ago a much quieter experiment in Islamic statehood (and of a totally different hue than that of ISIS) was attempted in Sudan. It is about time we come to understand it, and why the political form of the state, despite its genealogy in Europe and despite the loud rejection of the colonial past by Islamist thinkers, came to be the favored envelope in which Muslim political aspirations have been packaged from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Was the state simply inevitable as a political form following colonialism, as is often argued, or is there something about its mechanisms (its bureaucracies, its modes of wielding violence, its relationship to territory, its impersonal nature) that has been particularly attractive to contemporary Islamic movements?

By examining the micropolitics of individual and organizational struggles for new modes of Islamic modernity in Sudan under the “Islamic state” and in the interregnum between two periods of disunification (civil war and then national partition), a context of great political instability and thus experimentation, this book expands our understanding of how Islamic politics works as it faces the challenges of governing a diverse and dynamic population. By forcing us outside of models that see Islamic politics *either* as opposed to western political ambitions *or* as simply providing Islamic versions of the political ideals we hold dear (whether as celebrants or critics of modernity), Sudan’s experience allows us to see an Islamic politics that proceeds on its own terms, in conversation with political trends sweeping the globe, but also reconceiving the scope of the political in ways that are rarely appreciated (Chapter 5 outlines this argument in more detail).

In the chapters that follow, we will examine the Sudanese Islamic state experiment through the lens of the ethnographic present, in a period when, due to the pressures of peace with the majority non-Muslim South, it was being rethought at many levels. Such a rethinking has given fuel to groups and thinkers that call for a revitalization and reform of Islam not in response to growing secularism, lax morals, or Westernization, as is the case in most examples of modern Islamic reform and revival (e.g., Euben and Zaman 2009), but in response to a problematic experience *with Islamism*, the twenty-plus year phenomenon of Inqadh rule. Interestingly, these responses do not come in the language of a rejection of Islamic politics or modes of social organization, but rather argue for a reworking of Islamic political theory, ritual praxis, and moral reasoning on a diverse set of foundations. These arguments do not emerge solely from the ideas of modernist Muslim intellectuals (such as the vanguard of the ruling regime), but instead encompass a multitude of Islamic intellectual and organizational trends. The

rise of the NIF government led paradoxically *not* to the monopolization (or even success) in Sudanese society of the modernist Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamic activism that the NIF upheld, but instead built a scaffolding for the resurgence and the exponential growth of other trends in contemporary Islam, whose programs overlapped in often uncomfortable ways with those of the ruling regime and which came to engage the Islamic state in novel ways. The “Islamic revival,” in the Sudanese case at least, seems to be neither a monolithic flood-stream sweeping away more secular ways of being, nor a global force blotting out local traditions,<sup>24</sup> but rather a space of contest in which questions about the nature of Islam and its place in modern articulations of state, society, and subjectivity are continually hashed out.

24 Victoria Bernal (1997), in one of the few studies of the Sudanese “Islamic revival” as a social phenomenon, came to the conclusion that the Islamic revival meant a homogenization of Islam, blotting out the diversity of local traditions through global forms of scripturalist Islam with which she associates the NIF (“The global Islamic revival is, among other things, a movement from local particularized Islams to Islam as a world religion” [p. 132]). Our evidence of the effervescence of a variety of Islamic traditions, reacting in creative ways to the complicated itinerary of the NIF project, proves that far from Islam being homogenized in modern times, the interaction with new global trends has created innumerable syntheses unimaginable in earlier decades.