Max Weber argued that ‘only the Occident knows the state in the modern sense, with a constitution, specialised officialdom and the concept of citizenship. Beginnings of this in antiquity and in the Orient were never able to fully develop.’1 Weber’s perception of the non-Western pre-modern world suggests a lack of sophistication in forms of political organisation prior to the development of nation-states. However, this may not be an entirely valid assumption. The nation-state exists as the most contemporary and powerful manifestation of the concept of sovereignty and political order. The nation-state is not, however, unchallenged. Historians suspect that the first ‘states’ began to form in Mesopotamia around 3500 BCE, created by the Sumerian civilisation. Despite the structure of these states looking dramatically different from the modern state, this still suggests the beginnings of a political order.2 Indeed, as Bernard Lewis observes, ‘the bureaucratic state is probably older in the Middle East than anywhere else in the world’.3 Ideas regarding sovereignty, the state and legitimacy are intimately linked. They are relevant in attempting to conceptualise both the contemporary international system, which has its basis in the Western tradition, as well as the Salafi Jihadist notion of order based on the Islamic tradition.

In the contemporary international system the concept of sovereignty is a source of significant debate. It is difficult, as Hideaki Shinoda contends, ‘to find a political notion more controversial than sovereignty’.4 It is a perplexing task, as Brian Nelson observes, to comprehend in one definition the actual variety of states that have emerged over historical time. At the same time it is impossible to discuss the state without some understanding of its major characteristics.5 Kenneth Waltz suggested that sovereignty is a ‘bothersome concept’.6 It is indeed the case that modern scholars of politics have struggled to define the notion in the
manner in which Hobbes, Bodin and Rousseau professed to confidently do in their own time. It is, nonetheless, of significant concern to international relations.7

The idea of the state is tied to a concept of sovereignty and legitimacy. However, how far sovereignty extends in both a social and geographical sense, and to whom legitimacy is given, is the crux of the debate between those who advocate the international system characterised by nation-states and those who adhere to Islamic concepts of political organisation. Stephen Krasner provides four meanings of the term sovereignty: (1) Westphalian, referring to the exclusion of other actors from the internal affairs of the state; (2) Interdependent sovereignty, the ability to control cross border movements; (3) International legal sovereignty, recognition by other states of a state’s domestic sovereignty; (4) Internal sovereignty, the ability for internal authorities to maintain control.8 However, these considerations give rise to significant questions: (1) Is the state as it is understood in the early-twenty-first century the only applicable notion of the concept of sovereignty? (2) Has the teleological Western-driven process, from tribal organisation to nation-state organisation, been completed with no challenge from previously established ideas of political organisation?

The idea of sovereignty has come to be rather confused in the discourse of international politics, particularly in relation to the Middle East in the twentieth century.9 Challenges to the integrity and sustainability of the contemporary state are often discussed in the context of globalisation, technological advances, weak and failing states, and the reality of porous borders. However, in the Middle East, the nation-state, since its inception, has also been challenged on ideological grounds. In the Muslim Middle East notes Trudy Jacobsen, ‘two understandings of the term sovereignty have developed in parallel with each other’.10 One based on the nation-state model of sovereign states and the other rooted in Islamic concepts of political order. The European example was imported under colonial rule and replaced Islamic empires that had existed in various forms since the seventh century. There has been significant confusion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that has arisen from differences in the Western meaning of sovereignty and the state and the complex Islamic understanding of the phenomenon. This has had an impact on the rise of Salafi Jihadism and its conflict with the US and the West.

Since the beginning of the wars of religion in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the process of nation-state building has continued to be distributed throughout the world. It is, indeed,