

ALESSANDRO RICCI

ISLAMIC RADICALISM, *JIHAD* AND GEOGRAPHY OF UNCERTAINTY

Introduction. – The beginning of 2015 may be remembered in the history of international relations for different reasons: there has been a serious internal attack in France and, at a different scale, a reshaping of a new political map (Kaplan, 2012) is going to be defined, caused by the radicalization and actions of jihadist movements in different parts of the world, from the Middle East to Africa.

The recent news from the international context, outlined in the media and linkable together in some cases, impose some reflections on the change of the international system in a political-geographic sense (Raffestin, 2012; Turco, 2003).

We may mention some international facts occurred at the beginning of 2015: the attacks in France, made by the Kouachi brothers and by Amedy Coulibaly; the carnage in Yemen, where a fundamentalist Islamic suicide attempt in Sana'a provoked 33 deaths and about 60 injured; the attack of Boko Haram in the North East of Nigeria, with the destruction of 16 small towns and the death of 2.000 people. Then, the advancement of the Is (or Isis, or even Isil), which shows a changing scenario in the political geography of the region, where the internal and daily struggle configures an unstable situation, today endemic, that is changing the political map under the control of the Caliphate, between Syria and Iraq.

It seems that a sort of *geography of uncertainty* is rapidly emerging, with specific regard to national borders. This kind of definition can be applied to the Western context as well, for the progressive permeability of the frontiers of the National States (Kaplan, 1994; Ohmae, 1990; Ó Tuathail, 1999), but it appears to be more evident in the regions of Syria¹ and Iraq, where a redefinition of the borders is going on, because of the *de facto* control of the conquered zones by the Isis; the same category could be applied even in Nigeria, where the systematic action of the Boko Haram militias – which have tragic consequences – seems to erode portions of national territory, even considering the difficulties of the State to contrast the jihadist troops.

Moreover, some changes in the international relations and in the military commitment might regard France and other Western States, if we accept the idea of the attacks in France as an act of war. On this point, some conceptual reflections will be necessary.

«Islamic State» and erosion of borders. – A first and crucial political-geographical issue about the Isis sequence of events is to understand if we can talk of a Islamic State, which may justify the idea of a regional geographical uncertainty. The self-defined Caliphate has changed in time its internal structure, acquiring a not-defined territorial dimension. The name of the organization confirms the tendency to

¹ Loretta Napoleoni (2014, p. 68) individuates the internal conflict in Syria as one of the most important causes of the territorial advancement of Is. About the minorities in the near East and in Syria in the geopolitical analysis of the conflict, see Bettoni (2014).

«stretch» its borders: at first Isis (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) or Isil (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant) and then just Is, without a precise geographical reference. This last modification appears of great importance in order to understand the global tendency of the Caliphate, which does not recognize itself in any specific territories: it is the main characteristic of Is, which «aims at the approval of the entire Umma, the community of the believers, the core of Islam (Napoleoni, 2014, p. 62): a community identified by religious principles, not by territorial links (Scarcia Amoretti, 2001).

The attempt of Isis to eradicate the political-geographic Western layout is here evident, in order to establish another one, made of a unique vision in which both religious and political elements coexist (see Watt, 1968). This kind of religious-political project has radically different references from the European States, born during the modern age (Minca e Bialasewicz, 2004; Farinelli, 2007), which emerged from a long period of secularization (see Berger, 1999): the political approach of Is is «imperial» (see Akhtar, 2011), it naturally tends to be in contrast with the Western one, and to go over the territorial and State borders established by the Western powers (Belkeziz, 2009). Indeed, «the aspiration to unity, united to cultural and geo-economic factors, determines [...] a continuous vocation to experiment imperial forms of State, in the name of the *dâr al-Islâm*» (Scarcia Amoretti, 2001, p. 22). This seems to be the reason why many scholars can hardly «categorize» what is happening in the Middle East: the difficulties to define that situation also derive from a wrong «territorial» conception of Islam: in Mandaville's opinion, this is another result of modernity (2007, p. 82).

Some other scholars (Tabusi, 2014) have already underlined the difficulties to identify the Is as a real State: using the Western political conceptions, it is possible to call it a State only *de facto* and partially. Is has just military occupied some territories and that could be identified as a condition of a *state of exception* (Schmitt, 2009), but it is not a political State entity in the strict sense, because of three reasons: its borders are undetermined; it is not recognized by the international community; and finally because it has the propensity to expand universally.

In this regard, the Is' statements – if they are propagandistic or not is pointless in this context – about the conquest of Rome and other Western cities reveal a global propensity, because they are based on the concept of *Jihad*. Such concept itself does not include the idea of borders and limitations: the enemy, in the *Jihad*, it is not conceived in territorial terms, but only in religious and moral terms. This is why *Jihad* can be called a non-territorial concept. In its radical vision the condition of *Islâm* is aimed, and this is conceived only in global terms, because «the more the State expands, the nearer is the perfect realization of God's will. He who works for this realization is in the condition of *Islâm*, i.e. in active submission to God» (Scarcia Amoretti, 2001, p. 16). In this sense, the Is' action appears to be literally faithful to this conception considered in extreme and military terms.

The Caliphate's advancements have two main consequences: the first one is the geographical uncertainty; the second one is about the attempt to create a different political and geographical model: no longer a certainty based on the European and Western principles, but one based on religious principles. This is the deep contradiction: the geographical uncertainty is only related to the confrontation with the West and its conception of «sovereignty».

War, terrorisms and jihad. – In Is' objective to establish itself universally, in its natural tendency to expand, in its attempt to affirm its own global «geographical certainty» and in the dismantle of Western political and geographical assumptions, a radical transformation into the jihadist world is revealed. In this regard Is is very different from Al-Qaeda, because it is going beyond its limitations, contributing to a rise of violence. Al-Qaeda has been, and even today is, a terroristic formation, which wants to create

terror throughout the Western States and over its citizens (Terni, 2014²); the Islamic State, on the contrary, is trying to go beyond this conception of creating terror over the Western States through decapitations and the illegal use of force: they are trying to create a sovereign State, *de facto* and *de jure*. On the one hand Al-Qaeda, with the attacks over the last decades succeeded to dismantle the Western political certainties, from the other one the Caliphate is trying to impose its political categories.

This point is crucial to understand even the radicalization process over the jihadist world and its consequences: the rise in the use of terror and coercion concerns the security in Europe and the geographical-political changes over the territories exposed to the jihadist action. This last element puts together different contexts, only apparently distant: the French attacks, the Islamic State and Boko Haram. All of these find their common ground in the jihadist conception of the *defense of the faith* from external threats, which is strictly intrinsic to the concept of *jihad*. In facts, terrorism is «always offensive from the tactic point of view, but it can be both offensive and defensive from the strategic one» (Colombo, 2006, p. 46). From this perspective, the attacks in Paris and the advancements of Is and Boko Haram appear to respond to a same logic, both offensive and defensive, of *jihad*, for the defense of the faith from external threats. These dynamics contributed to a progressive arise of violence from the jihadist groups and they were implemented by a sort of internal struggle to the jihadist Islam – that is both military and propagandistic.

What is a threat and what is not? The West, with its myths and references, for Isis and Al-Qaeda, is a threat to the faith to be fought with terroristic, ideological and military methods. From this perspective, the terroristic actions made by Al-Qaeda and the conquests of Isis seem to be convergent, both having the defense of the faith into the *jihad* as main objective, even if pursued through different methods. They perceive themselves as legitimated by religion and this gives a further drive and violence to their action.

Even though the objectives are similar and aimed globally, the methods used by Al-Qaeda and Is are radically different. A further question is now necessary: are the killings made by the Kouachi brothers and by Coulibaly acts of «global» *terrorism* or acts of *war* against France and the West, as several international media used to define them (see Amato, 2015)? In other words: is that *terrorism*³ or *war*?

The answer to this question may change the terms of the main topics of this contribute: by affirming that France is at war would mean to state that a struggle between two or more factions is going on, and this would consequently extend the domain of uncertainty and the territories involved in the changes in the Middle East, without considering the military forces and the relations among States and in the scenarios of international change. On the contrary, by recognizing that the attacks in France are acts of terrorism would limit the geographical domain of uncertainty, even though a climax of fundamentalist violence and a spatial extension is occurring.

On the difference between *war* and *terrorism* – which Marco Antonsich (2015) as well has developed – is important to make some clarifications, even though it is very hard to put the Paris attacks into a clear conceptual frame. That is because they elude the normal types of war action of the last decades. Taking for good the Aaron (1970) definition of *terrorism*, which underlines the disproportion between the used violence and the psychological mass effects produced, the Paris attacks appear to be adherent to this

² At this regard it is interesting to underline as, in a wider dissertation about the «geographical uncertainties», Massimo Terni reasoned on the progressive «dissolution» of the Nation-State in its main principles. In any case, the idea that «the State, through its laws, protects anyone from the other ones' aggressiveness and from the auto-destructive drives. Under the protection of a powerful sovereign State, anybody feels more safe» (Terni, 2014, p. 12).

³ About this, see Fossati (2003).

typology: a limited number of killed people contributed to spread terror into the population, with a feeling of failure of the State protection to its citizens. The extraordinary employment of French forces after the attacks contributed to the enforcement of this feeling. If «the terroristic method elude the object of its political hostility», not hitting it directly (Colombo, 2006, p. 40), and considering the *non-definition* of its action as a further characteristic of terrorism, both these traits of terrorism exceed the Paris attacks.

Taking for granted the link between the French terrorists and Al-Qaeda in Yemen, terrorism can be seen as a *medium* to *provoke* a war, as it was for the attempt of 28th June 1914 in Sarajevo: from this perspective, the Paris attacks can be read as tools to provoke a war against the West. At present, however, this situation does not exist, because a clear deployment of forces is missing and the minimal conditions of the *jus ad bellum* do not exist. About this and the legitimacy to declare war much more can be said⁴. Taking the von Clausewitz's statement in the *Vom Kriege* (2000) about war – as a armed struggle between two opposed wills – at present this situation does not exist: the main objective of the French terrorists, in their own words, was to «revenge Mohammed»⁵, not to declare war against the West – that is realistically impossible in the short term, because of the isolation of their actions and their inevitable tragic ending. In short: the intentions of the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly were to revenge Mohammed, in order to warn the Western world, in the sign of Al-Qaeda «myth» and maybe supported by Al-Qaeda of Yemen. In the Coulibaly case the declared link with Isis seems to be less strict, even though he was in contact with the Kouachi brothers.

Conclusions. – The changes in the political-geography domain mainly regard the Middle East, including the Yemen, where the political tumults are producing strong internal changes. The European context appears to be less involved, because the only significant changes are about the struggle against terrorism and less about the political-geographical transformations.

The major fact is the *jihadist* struggle, which connects the different contexts here considered: in the a-territoriality they find their common ground. That is the characterizing element of *jihad* in its *terroristic* configuration, because it is global and it goes over the State borders: from this perspective each Western State can be a victim of terrorism. Furthermore, another characteristic is the attempt of a political affirmation, as in the Isis and Boko Haram examples confirm. That is a «imperial» attempt, because it does not admit any borders and because it produces a geographical uncertainty, only conceivable in the confrontation with the West.

In the concept of a defense of the faith, as declared by all the jihadist groups (both terroristic and «political» ones), the territorial belonging is not considered. The State divisions, the national distinctions and the proper conquest of territories are not important in the jihadist mentality. It is much more important the war against the infidels, that has no territorial limits. In other words, territory has no weight, while in the Western modern political mentality it is basic. In the Europeans' modern mentality the identification of a national culture with a portion of globe is crucial and of primary importance.

The global approach used by jihadists, whit religious and moral roots, seems to be corroborated by a internal struggle in the Islamist world and by a sort of «competition» in the jihadist struggle. Both Isis and Boko Haram act universally, going against the Western secularized mentality.

⁴ The topic, yet faced by Colombo (2006), is strongly debated mostly from the political science perspective: it is not the context to give organic answers, but it is useful to report the positions of the ones who think that «the war is disappeared not because the international violence is disappeared, but because the political and juridical form of defining the war is disappeared» (2006, p. 277).

⁵ These are the words used by killers, hearable from the available videos.

These may be some of the causes of the actual geography of uncertainty in some regional contexts: not only Iraq and Syria, but the Nigerian territory as well, where Boko Haram act with the same a-territorial references. In this sense, the Coulibaly's video declarations, in which he states that «if you attack the Caliphate, if you attack the Islamic State, we will attack you» stretches the geographical domain of uncertainty, even because of the lack of a centripetal clerical structure: «in the absence of a Church or clergy, the realization of the design is left into the uncertain hands of the laic supporters of the faith» (Rutheven, 1999, p. 15). The attacks occurred in France represent the geographical extension of the jihadist terror. Will the global inclination of jihadist terrorism become a new global war, with a consequent and more extended geography of uncertainty?

Bibliography

- AKHTAR S., *Islam as Political Religion. The Future of an Imperial Faith*, London, Routledge, 2011.
- AMATO F., *Parigi, il momento di fermarsi a riflettere*, Il Corriere della Sera – La città Nuova, 14 gennaio 2015 (<http://lacittanuova.milano.corriere.it/2015/01/14/parigi-il-momento-di-fermarsi-a-riflettere/>).
- ANTONSICH M., *Capire “casa nostra” prima di agitare una guerra di religione*, Il Corriere della Sera – La città Nuova, 12 gennaio 2015 (<http://lacittanuova.milano.corriere.it/2015/01/12/capire-casa-nostra-prima-di-agitare-una-guerra-di-religione/>).
- ARON R., *Pace e guerra fra le nazioni*, Milano, Comunità, 1970.
- BELKEZIZ A., *The State in Contemporary Islamic Thought. A Historical Survey of the Major Muslim Political Thinkers of the Modern Era*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2009.
- BERGER P.L. (a cura di), *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Washington, D.C., Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999.
- BETTONI G., *Frontiere e minoranze in Siria. Per una analisi geopolitica*, in «BSGI», Serie XIII, vol. VII, 2014, pp. 611-619.
- VON CLAUSEWITZ K., *Della Guerra*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000.
- COLOMBO A., *La guerra ineguale. Pace e violenza nel tramonto della società internazionale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2006.
- FARINELLI F., *L'invenzione della Terra*, Palermo, Sellerio, 2007.
- FOSSATI M., *Terrorismo e terroristi*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2003.
- KAPLAN R., *The coming anarchy: how scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism, and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», 273, 44 (21), Feb. 1994.
- KAPLAN R., *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*, New York, Random House Publishing, 2012.
- MANDAVILLE P.G., *Global Political Islam*, London, Routledge, 2007.
- MINCA C. e L. BIALASIEWICZ, *Spazio e Politica. Riflessioni di geografia critica*, Padova, Cedam, 2004.
- NAPOLEONI L., *Isis. Lo Stato del terrore: chi sono e cosa vogliono le milizie islamiche che minacciano il mondo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2014.
- Ó TUATHAIL G., *Borderless Worlds: Problematizing Discourses of Deterritorialization*, in «Global Finance and Digital Culture. Geopolitics», 4, 2, 1999.
- OHMAE K., *The borderless world: power and strategy in the interlinked economy*, London, HarperCollins, 1990.
- RAFFESTIN C., *La sfida della geografia tra poteri e mutamenti globali*, in «documenti geografici», 0, 2012, pp.

55-60.

RUTHEVEN M., *Islam*, Torino, Einaudi, 1999.

SCARCIA AMORETTI B., *Il mondo musulmano. Quindici secoli di storia*, Roma, Carocci, 2001.

SCHMITT C., *Le categorie del politico. Saggi di teoria politica*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2009.

TABUSI M., *L'importanza di chiamarsi Stato (Islamico)*, luogoespazio.info, 1 novembre 2014,
(<http://nuke.luogoespazio.info/Default.aspx?tabid=466&EntryID=299>).

TURCO A., *Sociotopie: istituzioni postmoderne della soggettività*, in DEMATTEIS G. e F. FERLAINO, *Il mondo e i luoghi: geografie delle identità e del cambiamento*, Torino, Ires, 2003.

WATT H.M., *Islamic Political Thought*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1968.

Università degli Studi di Trento, Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia

alessandro.ricci@unitn.it