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BORDERS AND MINORITIES IN SYRIA: A GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS

Abstract - Is the Syrian conflict a religious matter? In this conflict the representations “Shiites versus Sunnites” is correct? We will demonstrate that it is not the case and the geopolitical analyses can help to better understand that it is mainly a matter of territory. We underline in this paper the direct relationship between the reasons of this conflict and the unsolved definition of borders at the end of the First World War. The geopolitical methodology, proposed by Yves Lacoste, it's helpful to better understand the players positions, but also the reasons of a religious representations that is crystallizing the situation.

Media representations of the Syrian civil war show two main opponents: on the one hand the Salafi fundamentalists, aligned with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, on the other the Christian community, or other “smaller” communities. In practice, the representation of this conflict focuses on two aspects: a) the sequential events, much like a war chronicle, and b) the explanation of a religious struggle¹. Nevertheless, as in the case of Israel and Palestine, the issue is not just one of religion but, most importantly, of territory.

The focus of this article is a geopolitical analysis, as defined by Yves Lacoste², of the territory in relation to the ongoing Syrian clash. To avoid confusion, a necessary step to take is to offer an outline of the territory as a whole, and of the local participants therein. The geopolitical method in fact goes so far as to demand a diachronic consideration of the definition of borders - which is often relegated to a footnote, but which is hardly ever agreed upon when referring to current events. Let

¹ Trombetta L., « Iran, Siria, Libano: un unico campo di battaglia a sfondo confessionale » in *Europa*, 19 novembre 2013, <http://www.europaquotidiano.it/2013/11/19/iran-siria-libano-un-unico-campo-di-battaglia-a-sfondo-confessionale/> visitato il 26/02/2014. Dello stesso autore e sempre con una interpretazione confessionale per quanto attenta e approfondita si veda anche : “Siria”, Mondadori, Milano, 2013.

² Lacoste Y., “Preamble”, in *Dictionnaire de Géopolitique*, Flammarion, Paris, 1993. Pagg. 1-33.

us recall then the concept of Near East, and of its borders, which are essential elements to refine the thesis of this paper.

The Near East and Syria

What do we mean by Near East today? However inane it may seem, it is important to define this notion, not only because of widespread assumptions, but also to reconnect with the representations built by the West, which more than ever have an impact on this region³.

Said reminds us how Europe exists and defines itself against the ‘Orient’, an organism sketched out vaguely, though recognized as “[...] the most penetrated international relation subsystem in today’s world”⁴.

The Near East stands between the Mediterranean Basin and Europe on one side, and the Middle East (a larger enclave which includes the Near East itself alongside Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan) on the other, in addition to the East (Pakistan, India), and the Far East (China, Japan). To cite Yves Lacoste⁵, we can refer to the Near East as the 800-km coast that runs vertically North (Turkey) to South (Egypt).

The Near East, then, is enclosed by the Mediterranean to the west, and to the east by a rift which begins with the Gulf of Aqaba – which, together with the Gulf of Suez, surrounds the Sinai Peninsula – and, bordering the Dead Sea, whose surface and shores are 407 m below sea level, follows the Jordan River up into the Beqaa Valley between Mount Lebanon to the west, and the Anti-Lebanon to the east. This geological ‘fracture’ beginning with the Gulf of Aqaba is actually the slanted extension of another seawater inlet, the Red Sea. From here, the Gulf of Aqaba separates the African from the Arabian tectonic plate. The Sinai, the West Bank highlands and Mount Lebanon are an extension of the African plateau, whereas the Arabian peninsula begins east of the Dead Sea with the Jordan plateau, the Golan heights and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. The Middle East begins east of this mountain range, as Arabia descends slowly towards Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf, and infiltrates below the Iranian plateau, whose subduction zone contains the largest reserve of hydrocarbon on the planet.

A question that may arise in this context is: in our reflection on the Near and Middle East, could we include countries that are far from the Mediterranean such as Afghanistan? Our answer would be yes, we could, though we should leave it for another paper, since we are focusing here on the implications of the definitions of Near East and Mediterranean, and on the variables we must consider in this analysis.

³ Brown L.C., *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984, p. 4.

⁴ Saïd E.W., *Orientalism*, “Introduzione”, Vintage Books, New York, 1978

⁵ Lacoste Y., *Géopolitique de la Méditerranée*, Albin Michel, Paris, 2006.

All this information leads us to appreciate the importance of the Near East, a land which has been under dispute since all hydrocarbons harvested in Iran and Saudi Arabia have been travelling through the region since the early 20th Century, in spite of the increase in traffic from those countries into the opposite direction, that is, towards China, India and Japan. A key point in this discussion is indeed that control of the Syrian Isthmus, which comprises a larger territory spanning from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf all the way to the Indian Ocean, has been coveted by many for over two thousand years. With the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the French and the English fought to control the region, which they divided into new states, and which they renamed using ancient names such as Syria, Jordan and what would later be called Israel. Naming these areas with traditional, historical names has also reinforced ancient borders (which were, after all, not all that ancient) and has frustrated the different inhabitants of that territory thus inviting fragile and debatable territorial actors. The Arab countries' lack of recognition for Israel, Damascus's attempt to occupy and integrate Lebanon, as well as Jordan's and the West Bank's (but also Gaza's and Egypt's) ambiguous and debatable borders vis-à-vis Israel are all recent predicaments which began at the end of World War I, and which have remained unsolved, religious appeal notwithstanding.

Albeit Syria possesses meager sources of water- which in any case are object of wrangle between Turkey and Iran, aside from Syria⁶ - and scarce sources of hydrocarbon, it still holds a significant position in the Near East chessboard. Syria has featured this prominently since the end of World War I, after the French and the English subdivided this territory against the promises made to the Arab residents, according to which they would be allowed to constitute one Syrian state based on the ancient and great Syria pre-Ottoman Empire. In fact, Faisal took residence in Damascus to complete his project of a "great Arab state" that would reproduce that of the Omayyadi's, the first dynasty of caliphs.

The 'Great Syria' as a historical constant inspired the Baath (o Ba'th) party and its resurrection project of the Arab nation (Ba'th, بعث, meaning "Resurrection"). The design of a great nation almost came true with the union of Syria and Egypt in 1958 into the United Arab Republic. Under Nasser, however, a portion of the Baath party leaned towards socialism, which turned the majority against him. The party declared itself anti-communist, and condemned the predominance of one party leader (which is a paradox, if we think that in all countries where such a party rules, there is also a dictator), which was deemed contrary to the formation of a great Arab state, and which ultimately broke up Syria and Egypt in 1961. This was a special time for the Arab countries, the so-called 'the Arab Cold War', which had disastrous consequences on the definitions of powers and borders in this region⁷. During this chapter, the Arab public sphere came to life, which influenced

⁶ Freeman K., « Water wars? Inequalities in the Tigris - Euphrates river basin », in *Geopolitics*, 6:2, 2001, 127-140.

⁷ Lynch M., *The Arab Uprising; The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*, New York: Public Affairs (Perseus Group), 2012.

the North African states and the Near East, even during that phase of superficial democratization of the '80s and '90s⁸ till the days of the 'Arab Spring'.

As we have just described, in the '60s Egypt and Syria separated, and anti-communism became a greater divider. In this atmosphere and with an international political approach, a military group, mostly composed by Alawite minorities, seized power in Syria and installed the dictatorship of Hafiz al-Assad, who governed until his death, June 10 2000, and who was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad. Hafiz al-Assad was able to strategically govern Syria, a state objectively devoid of strengths, through the border conflicts with Turkey, through the issue of the Golan heights with Israel, and through the delicate problem of Palestine, striving to impede its victory in every way while attempting to appear as a supporter of the Palestinian cause.

The main goal of this strategy was to prevent the rise of any local power in hopes to unite all Arab territories of the Near and Middle East, and realize the Panarabian dream – an amalgamation of the 'Great Syria' dream.

As confirmation of this, let us recall Damascus' interest for a subdivision of Iraq in three parts so that the Kurdish province in the north could easily be absorbed into the 'Great Syria' project. Similarly, a Palestine nation that becomes a state could create obstacles for this project (unless it decided autonomously to become part of this great union). Lebanon is not an exception in the 'Great Syria' project since it is the only state in the region, which is the reason why Damascus has repeatedly attempted occupation.

Ethnic or religious minorities?

The composition of the Near East and of Syria is the result of relatively recent strategies which are also irrevocably tied to the control of this territory. However the complexity of this area, as can be inferred, does not coincide at all with the unsophisticated portrayals of integralism, of dictators against Islamist fundamentalists, of Sunnis against Shiites.

That is why it is useful to examine, albeit not exhaustively, the territorial actors that are mentioned more often, particularly in the media. After all, the main goal of this article is to show how the Syrian fragmentation in ethnicities, or different religious groups, is less well-defined than one may think. This is true especially because of the presence not only of Christians as an alternative to Muslims, but also of other groups, such as the Alawites. We will see also how these groups should not only be identified from a religious perspective but also from the point of view of their ethnicity, as in the case of the Kurds or the Circassians. Many publications detail an opposition between Sunnis and Shiites, or, more simplistically, between Islamist fundamentalists on one side and the other religions on the other. But the majority of the material one can read on this topic is written by

⁸ Mamadouh V., « Making Sense of Ongoing Revolutions: Geopolitical and Other Analyses of the Wave of Arab Uprisings Since December 2010 », *Geopolitics*, 18:3, pag.745.

journalists who report on one theme for many years before moving on to other world religions. A representation based on dichotomy, especially of a religious nature, is easy to communicate, and effortless to explain in a television news story or on a newspaper column⁹. This portrayal, however, is not only erroneous but also misleading for those who want to comprehend the current situation.

Before delving into an explanation of the ethnic and religious mosaic of this region, let us look at how the media obstinately display the Sunni/Shiite conflict, but fail to report that in September 2014 the Iranian Shiites together with moderate Sunnis (Kurds) fought against the ISIS fanatics. This brings us back to the distribution of the Near and Middle East populations, and to its focal point of change: the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Besides, it was then when the borders were delineated. The presence of Armenians, of Kurds, and of Assyrians near the Turkish border was motivated by the fact that the French dislocated these populations to this area, which had just become a French protectorate, in hopes of erecting a protective barrier against the Turks, made up of their long-time enemies. The French also relocated a large portion of Alawites to the north, where they are the majority today. Using their usual colonization technique (exception made for the way they acted in Morocco), the French integrated the minorities into an apparatus which would control the majority, like the Sunnis, for example, or the Turkish-speaking peoples who, though a minority in Syria, represented a potential ally for the Turks, and for this reason were considered enemies. Case in point, all minorities had rights to have schools where their language was taught, except for the Turkish-speaking Turkmens, who were deemed a prospective ally for the Turks. The division into ethnic groups is critical because it explains the situation better than religious grouping would, but it is almost always left off by the media. Therefore we will delve on this topic because too often, however difficult it may be to obtain exact data, these groups are mentioned without quantification, and without attempting to understand their distinguishing features that may render their position less evident than it may seem. This taxonomic job may seem redundant, then again it helps us show how those features, together with the study of the Sunni or Shiite position on the territory, can lead to an understanding that the depiction of the “Sunnis vs. Shiites” is not only superficial but misleading.

Even though the Kurds appear amongst the rebel forces against the Assad regime, they are often left in the shadows since it is not mentioned that, while the majority is Sunni, a large portion of the population is Christian and Yazidi. The nine million Kurds¹⁰ living in Syria live in a fragile environment between Turkey on one side, and the Assad regime on the other. It is not unknown that the Kurds follow the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCCDC) as opposed to the National Syrian Council (NSC), which is housed in Istanbul. The agreement between the NCCDC and the NSC on December 30, 2013 describes very clearly the Kurdish community as a

⁹ Hugh Macdonald (2001) *Geopolitics in the Middle East*, Geopolitics, 6:3, 177-185

¹⁰ Y. Courbage, « La population de Syrie, des réticences à la transition (démographique) », in B.Dupret, Z. Ghazzal, Y.Courbage, M. al-Dbiyat (a cura di) *La Syrie au présent : reflets d'une société*, Sindbad/Actes Sud & Ifpo, Coll. "La Bibliothèque arabe", 2007.

pillar of the Syrian nation, a term which is not used in conjunction with other communities or religious confessions¹¹.

Turkey also plays a vital role with regards to the Armenian community, who numbers about one hundred thousand members today, and who relocated to Syria in 1915 in the aftermath of the genocide perpetrated by the Turks. The Armenians, who are for the most part Gregorian Christians with only a small percentage of Catholics, have always been loyal to the Assad regime. However their contemporary situation is less solid than before, though the media have not caught onto that. Truly, their support to the regime was due above all to having been defended by the Syrians against the Turks. The Armenian community in Syria is strongly connected to the Armenian Republic, much like all members of the Armenian diaspora. Armenia today is in dire straits since it is surrounded by hostile countries like Turkey. The only neighboring country to allow commercial traffic is Iran, an ally of Syria – which is another reason for the Armenians to support Assad. Something could change if and when Turkey opens up to the Erevan government.

Much like the Armenians, the Turkmen are also bound to a country outside of Syria. Opinions are divided: some¹² count 140,000 Turkmen living in Syria, other count a few millions, since long-time Turkmen residing in Syria have assimilated¹³, though they are still viewed with diffidence as historically they have sided with Turkey.

The Circassians (50,000-100,000) are Sunni¹⁴, and very devoted to the regime. They were expatriated from a territory that has since then been absorbed by Russia, where they would like to return. Not to deprive Assad of Circassian support, Russia has forbidden their return, in view of the fact that many Circassians occupy high ranks in the Assad army¹⁵.

The Assyrians, who inform 2% of the Syrian population (about 500,000 people)¹⁶, are another minority largely committed to Bachar al-Assad, although in 2004 the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) espoused the Kurdish cause in the Qamishli revolt. Though chiefly Nestorian Caldean Christians, with some Orthodox and some Catholics, the Assyrians have not hesitated to defend the Kurdish cause, which attests to the fact that not all Syrian ethnic minorities unanimously sympathize with the Assad regime. In fact, within the Christian community, who comprises 5% of the population (about one million people), though predominantly Assad supporters, there are some initial disagreements, and many voices are dissenting against the regime, even though the state of

¹¹ <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2011/12/31/97001-20111231FILWWW00289-syrie-accord-entre-groupes-d-opposants.php>, consultato il : 9 gennaio 2014

¹² Y. Courbage, « La population de Syrie, des réticences à la transition (démographique) », *op.cit.*

¹³ “An Interview with the Spokesman of Syrian Turkoman Movement; Ali Ozturkmen”, ORSAM, citato in : N.Benkorich “Les minoités dans le printemps syrien” in *Le Debat*, Marzo-aprile 2012, n°169, pagg.:23-34.

¹⁴ Y. Courbage, « La population de Syrie, des réticences à la transition (démographique) », *op.cit.*

¹⁵ N.Benkorich “Les minoités dans le printemps syrien”, *op.cit.*

¹⁶ Y. Courbage, « La population de Syrie, des réticences à la transition (démographique) », *op.cit.*

affairs could be endangered by the war ending like it did in Iraq. But then again the Christians would not oppose a more balanced, less chaotic dissolution of the regime.

A similar point can be made for the Druses, who constitute 2% of the Syrian population¹⁷ and who live clustered in the al-Suwayda governorate, also known as the Druse Gebel, and in the Jaramana quarter in southeastern Damascus. Generally speaking, the Druses have some affiliation with the Assads though only the least influential of the three sheiks who lead the Druse community, Hamoud al-Hanawi¹⁸, has openly sided with al-Assad. The leading Druse political families are the Jounblat and the more powerful Arslan. To maintain the Druse alliance, al-Assad has favored the Arslans causing a fracture in the group, which goes to show that, no matter how many Druses figure within the Shabiha militia alongside the Alawites, the Druse support for al-Assad is much less unanimous than it seems¹⁹. Neither for that matter is the Alawites', whose numbers are around 11% of the total Syrian population²⁰. Many intellectuals and writers have unambiguously opposed al-Assad, and many members of the armed forces have abandoned their posts.

Lest we forget the official and public denunciation of the Alawite massacre made by the three Alawite sheiks of Homs. If al-Assad can count on an Alawite majority today is only because they fear the consequences of his fall more than they feel allegiance to the regime, which, truthfully, is alive only thanks to widespread political patronage than to loyalty to a community, or to a religious confession.

At this point, the question of whether the media representation of this conflict is accurate seems to elicit a negative answer. The Syrian uprising is different from the Tunisian or the Egyptian insurrections (we are knowingly excluding Libya here not only because of the nature of that regime, but also because of the meager demographics of the region). More than a struggle between Sunnis and Shiites, this upheaval is prompted by the disappointment of not receiving any benefits of the economic growth, which, albeit feeble, brought some wealth to Syria early in this century. Besides, the religious clash always seemed less compelling than it truly was; for example, the Alawites were considered heretics by the Shiites until very recently, when the Shiites welcomed the Alawites into their community only because of strong political pressures²¹. At a regional level, we see how "the local superpowers (Saudi Arabia and Iran) are taking advantage of the Sunni /Shiite clash, which is not genuinely religious but one of economics. So the Yemenites, a pious people motivated by the

¹⁷ Y. Courbage, « La population de Syrie, des réticences à la transition (démographique) », *op.cit.*

¹⁸ C. Roussel, « Les grandes familles druzes entre local et national », *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* [on line], 115-116 | décembre 2006, pubblicata il 14 febbraio 2012, consultata il 9 febbraio 2014. URL : <http://remmm.revues.org/3024>

¹⁹ N.Benkorich "Les minoités dans le printemps syrien", *op.cit.*, pag. 33

²⁰ Y. Courbage, « La population de Syrie, des réticences à la transition (démographique) », *op.cit.*

²¹ Sfeir A., *L'Islam contre l'Islam. L'interminable guerre des sunnite set des chiites*, Grasset, Parigi, 2013.

Sunni schism, go to war to attempt appropriation of an economic wealth that they will never be able to enjoy by reason of extreme poverty and dependence upon their foreign handlers”.²²

Conclusion

For a thorough analysis of the situation in Syria, we must also analyze the territory. The usual representation of a conflict based on religious difference is decisively wrong. Though it is evident that religious fundamentalism is crystallizing, relying on that explanation does not lead us to a deeper understanding. Moreover, it would not explain why fundamentalist Iran would support a secular regime in Damascus, who has always separated religion from politics. It is not enough to assert that, when all's said and done, Alawites are Shiites, as Teheran does. The secular nature of the Syrian government added to the non-Muslim support of Bachar al-Assad would be sufficient for Iran to forsake the alliance, which instead exist to maintain stability against a possible flare-up in Iraq, which is ruled by Shiites, not to mention the dangerous ISIS fanatics. On top of that, the religious issues do not allow us to examine the fragility of the Near East which resides in the recent and illegitimate territorial subdivision after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The geopolitical analysis presents a different viewpoint which begins with a territorial study and continues with a diachronic approach so as to connect phenomena which relate to the territory as well as to historical conditions. The Syrian conflict finds roots in century-old troubles which concern the strategic location of its territory. This 800km-long crossroads between three continents has not yet finished writing the last page of its history and of its geography.

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²² Sfeir A., *L'Islam contre l'Islam. L'interminable guerre des sunnite set des chiites*, op.cit., pag. 118.

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