

Nicosia 2017: National, International and Human Security in the Eastern Mediterranean

Panel: State and Society in the Eastern Mediterranean

Individual identities, factional affiliations, reconfigured states and international connections in the post-2011 Middle East and North-Africa

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The object of my presentation today, in the framework of this conference, whose aim is to propose visions of security that go beyond considerations pertaining to the sphere of expertise in international relations only, is to reflect on present-day situations in a region that I have been studying during all my career as a historian. Reflecting on cities of the region during the Ottoman and colonial eras, I have been tracking indeed the entanglements of scale and the mixed stakes between local powers, local factions, and geopolitical strategies. This led me to propose readings of local societies and of the events that transformed them, that nuance dominant narratives and existing dichotomies, like between, say, pre-modern and modern or western and middle eastern. Using methods of historical anthropology and of archival research, I showed, as for cities like Tunis, Aleppo or Cairo, how foreign powers, in the 19th century, instrumentalized local factions, that existed in cities but were generally submitted to a local imperial ottoman balanced order, in order to destabilize entire regions. This had as a consequence the destruction of such local balances, and introduced a vision of modernity that was not compatible with the basic features of the living together. Diverse identities, that always existed in the region, were reinterpreted and submitted to processes of solidification. This induced a huge challenge for society, and the decomposition of basic features of local urban civic life.

When working on such issues, I also witnessed, in real life, similar phenomena in the same cities of Cairo, Aleppo and Tunis. For example, a scene of extreme urban violence in the street in front of the national archives in Cairo, that corresponded, on an anthropological point of view, but also factional in a way, to things I had been unearthing in the archives during this same day. For example: bands of thugs beating protesters and acting as proxies and agents provocateurs for the police. Or violence against women as a political weapon.

This is when I started to reflect on a way to express this kind of parallel that be heuristically

correct and analytically pertinent. I published some of these reflections on the so-called Arab Spring in a collective book earlier this year.

What I would like to do today is to propose a certain number of reflections that address some issues that are generally hidden by dominant narratives. I'm not an investigative journalist, I did not use archival research to unearth these things just like I do for the past, but my knowledge of some processes in the past invites me to suggest some interpretive postures. This echoes in a way, the attitude of Pier Paolo Pasolini in front of political violence in Italy in the 1970s: he didn't have evidence of the involvement of geopolitical instrumentalizations, but his experience as an intellectual suggested him some interpretations. Later, historical research, in the archives, showed that not only he was right, but that instrumentalizations were even deeper as what he had thought. We'll see what historians of the future will find as for such things today.

One of my main points is about the construction of relationships of proxy between foreign powers and local factions. This builds a direct link between geopolitical manoeuvres and locality. The attitude has of course colonial origins and was even the object of strategical theoretizations during both colonization and the cold war. Such relationships do also change the very definition, position and identity of local factions (see for example the Berbers of Libya in recent years, the Alaoui of Syria, the Kurds...). The presence of diplomats and agents provocateurs on the field in order to incite local factions to exit negotiated situations of power distribution with local regimes has been a technique for years. Like in Libya since the 1980s. It was also the case in many other countries. This violence, which is a technique in international relations, sometimes transforms factions into militias. We have to interpret militias of present days in the region as the result of external actions of instrumentalization on existing factions in society. Of course, once a militia is armed and ideologically constructed, it becomes a key element in all evolutions of the region.

This dimension, and the violence it sparked, is also linked to the bigger one of external military interventions: bombing, invasions, occupations. Factions can be a pretext for intervention, a base for invasion, and a help for occupations. This in return also changes not only local balances, tragically, but also the very definition of the self and of groups in local societies.

This is why this entanglement of scales has to be addressed when discussing security. Existing dichotomies in narrations are not satisfying and are often hiding other, crucial, dimensions.

Among the dominant narratives, the dichotomies of values, and the implicit dimension of culturalism it includes, must also be challenged. Humanitarian interventions are often in the context of previous tragic instrumentalizations by the very powers that propose them.

The first of the unsaid aspects, that seems to me of crucial importance due to its inertia, relates to the cold war origins of global Jihad. Starting in the mid-1970s, a form of interpretation of Islam was promoted by the CIA and some of its proxys (Saudi and Pakistani intelligence services) in order to challenge the geopolitical influence of Soviet Russia in Afghanistan¹. The aim was to provoke a Russian invasion of the country, in defence of the local communist government, and eventually a weakening of Russia's capacity of external domination. The Soviet invasion happened in 1979 and the alliance between the US, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and extremist militias lasted at least until the fall of the Soviet regime. This not only created a precedent and reinforced extremist ideologies: it also shaped entire networks of power between the US, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and those extremist militias. Members of such militias were later instrumental in the creation of Al-Qaeda and part of the networks of power involved in earlier phases remained. In the name of the fight against communism, the so-called West played with fire. One can't forget this aspect when talking about Islam, radicalism and civilizational values.

Another tragic dimension is that the so-called West did not learn from this historical mistake, that counts among the causes of the 2001 tragic attacks in the US. The alliance with Jihadist groups and their financing, either directly or through proxies, remained an often used tactic until 2016. In Libya, during the late-1970s and the whole 1980s, extremist groups of fighters were used, in addition to plots aiming at killing M. Qaddafi², by British, French and US intelligence services in order to destabilize and fight the regime³. Such tactics are better known and documented as for Cuba, but what happened in Libya was comparable⁴. This kind of tactic was again applied during the so-called Arab Spring of 2010-2011⁵. While as a historian I do know the identity of some of the *agents provocateurs* of the past (members of European

1 See : Cole (Steve), *Ghost Wars. The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, London, Penguin, 2004, 738p. and Hartman (Andrew), « The Red Template : US Policy in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan », *Third World Quarterly*, 2002, 23-3, p.467-489.

2 Lewis (Neil), « Memo Mentioned Killing of Qaddafi », *The New-York Times*, 5 October 1986.

3 See : Jenkins (Philip), « Whose terrorists ? Libya and State Criminality », *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 1988, 12-1, p.5-24. Also : Lafi (Nora), *Kâdhâfi Mu'ammâr al (1942-2011)*, Encyclopaedia Universalis, <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/mu-ammâr-al-kadhafi/>

4 See : Hamm (Mark), « State-organized homicide: A study of seven CIA plans to assassinate Fidel Castro », *Making law: The state, the law, and structural contradictions* (1993): 315-46.

5 See : Lafi (Nora), [The "Arab Spring" in Global Perspective: Social Movements, Changing Contexts and Political Transitions in the Arab World \(2010–2014\)](#), in S. Berger and H. Nehring (eds.), *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective*, New-York, Palgrave, 677-702.

intelligence services in Ottoman cities for example), I of course don't know the identity and exact extent of actions of such figures as for recent events. But their action recalls me that of those of the past I see in the archives. The so-called Arab Spring included, indeed, a strong cold-war-style geopolitical dimension⁶, with the idea, fuelled by NATO experts (possibly under the influence of Polish members of this alliance on the model of tactics used in Ukraine) to use these revolts against pro-US dictators in Tunisia and Egypt (Ben Ali had been trained at a US military intelligence school and was a former CIA correspondent in the country⁷) against pro-Russian dictators in Libya, Syria and Yemen⁸. This effort at inverting the nature of the revolts is one of the most ambitious (and ambiguous) CIA and NATO operations since 1989. I don't know all the mechanisms and all the people involved, but I recognize some of these mechanisms. What my study in the archives about Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Greece, Lebanon and Syria in late-Ottoman times has illustrated is how European powers allied with local factions and militias in order to push their own agendas. I suspect it was the case again in 2010 and 2011. This configuration, of course, induced a strong path dependency, of which today's chaos is a consequence. Instrumentalizations are risky, as, once stimulated, a situation can evolve by itself. This also the history has told. In Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, partly acting as proxies and partly following their own agendas, have been supporting various Jihadist groups since 2011⁹. The birth of the Syrian branch of ISIS was partly a result of covert operations by Turkish intelligence services¹⁰. Moreover, many factions of revoltees that have been labelled as simply "Islamist" are in truth Jihadist. The consequence is that, on the pretext of fighting the dictatorship, the country has been destroyed. The Russian intervention in support of the regime has itself added its share of tragic damages, destructions and deaths. It is only in 2016 that Turkey stopped to support Jihadi groups in Syria. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, I don't know. As for the US, France and Great-Britain, their commandos on the ground long faced an ambiguous situation due to their support to groups whose relationship to the global jihadist ideology was not clear.

I have more direct and indirect information about Libya. I have been doing my PhD about this country, in which I have been living during the period of the embargo. I know a lot of people

6 See : Katerina Dalacoura (2012), 'The 2011 Uprisings in the Middle-East: Political Change and Geopolitical Implications', *International Affairs*, 88-1, p.63-79.

7 Ware (L.B.), « Ben Ali's Constitutional Coup in Tunisia », *Middle East Journal*, 1988, 42-4, p.587-601.

8 See : Curtis Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria", *MERIP*, n.262, 2013.

9 Sanger (David), « Rebel Arm Flow is said to benefit Jihadists in Syria », *The New-York Times*, 14 October 2012.

10 See : Philipps (David), « Research Paper : ISIS-Turkey Links », *HuffPost/Columbia University Institute of Human Rights*, 11/09/2014.

there, both popular and elite, and in all sectors of the administration, on all sides. What I would like to say is first that after a series of more or less spontaneous popular protests against the dictatorship in Benghazi, the real starting point of the revolt of 2011 is when factions of armed Jihadist fighters attacked prisons in order to free jailed Jihadists and caserns in order to seize more arms¹¹. From this moment on, there was no more peaceful revolt. A media campaign in the “West” labelled threats by the regime against these fighters (who had been present in the country for decades, often sponsored by foreign powers) as threats against the general population. This helped “sell” the idea of a no-fly zone in the “western” public opinion. This campaign resulted in the vote of resolution 1973 by the security council of the United Nations on 17 March 2011. On 19 March 2011, in total violation of this resolution¹², and betraying Russia and China, that had accepted the idea of a no-fly zone but not of an attack against the country, the US, Great-Britain and France launched a massive attack that eventually led to the fall of the regime after intensive bombings and months on fighting on the ground, where US, French and British commandos acted together with Jihadist militias. Some of these commandos, probably French, probably participated in the killing of M. Qaddafi. The war also made thousands of civilian victims. The whole civilian infrastructure of the country was also destroyed. This resulted into a double chaos: jihadists everywhere, eventually turning against their former allies. And now a situation of a dual power with dual foreign patrons and of negotiation by Europe with militias and factions of a violent governance of migrations.

Having chosen to openly betray Russia was part of the major mistakes made by NATO in Libya. If there is one thing I am sure of as a historian, it is that you don't betray Russia. The consequence of this fact is that Russia decided not to ever abandon Syria and to do everything necessary in order to protect the regime. Now both Libya and Syria have been destroyed. Millions of refugees had to leave Syria. In Libya, Europe is now willing to establish a regime that controls migrations from Africa and already opened camps for refugees and migrants on a highly questionable basis. The Mediterranean became a sea of death.

There are also unsaid aspects in the understanding of the question of the refugees from Syria in Europe. One aspect is that many of these refugees are in fact Turkish citizens of Kurdish culture that fled the war that their government is doing in their region of origin. Labelling them as “Syrians” in Europe was an easy compromise in order not to politically confront a difficult ally. Another unsaid truth is that a significant number of the victims of the war in Syria are

11 Lafi (Nora), « Libye », Encyclopaedia Universalis, <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/libye/>

12 See : Ulfstein (Geir) and Christiansen (Hege), « The Legality of the NATO Bombing in Libya », *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 2013, 62-1, p.159-171.

Palestinians. They were expelled from their land in 1948 and 1967. They have been living in Syria since then, in refugee camps that became urban neighbourhoods in Damascus, Aleppo and many other Syrian cities. These neighbourhoods have been particularly struck by the war. The war in Syria is thus also another episode of the forced displacement of the Palestinian population. I know that both as a scholar who has been doing decades of field work in Aleppo and Damascus and as a volunteer in a refugee camp in Berlin: I have been talking with hundreds of these people. In official discussions about Syria however, this dimension is almost never evoked.

In Yemen, Saudi Arabia, in the name of a geopolitical and sectarian opposition to Iran, is destroying a country with the support of Europe and the US.

Another point I would like to address and that belongs to the unsaid dimensions at the core of security issues in the region is the nature of the state of Israel. The creation of this state has complex roots in the history of Europe in the 19th century. One must reflect on all the ambiguities of these roots and address them. Creating an enclave in a former province of the Ottoman empire during a moment of British colonization was contrary to all the universalist values Europe thinks are part of its identity. There were of course noble reasons, like after 1945 establishing a shelter for populations persecuted in Europe, but in order to think security in the region, one has to reflect on the ambiguities of policies like expulsion, separation, occupation, eviction and classification of the population according to their religion. The definition of Israel that is at the core of all discussions on security is incompatible with peace. One has to address this. Studies of Ottoman ways of living together and governance of diversity, without naïve or irenic visions of this period, might help introduce critical views in discussions. Studies on the national construction of Greece and Turkey might help too. It could seem that population exchanges and ethnic and confessional homogenization (cleaning in fact) were successful in creating post-Ottoman stability. But the example of this city of Nicosia illustrated the limits of the concept and the fact that only negotiated solutions of living together can achieve security. One also has to address present-day frontiers of Europe and the governance of migrations. Security on all shore, but also migratory movements are all linked. But the present trend at acting violently on all aspects is not good for security. More nuance in geopolitical instrumentalizations might help reducing the violence of tragic migrations and their violent governance by Europe.

My last point is about the instruments and powers that use security as a key word, arguing that their action goes in the direction of security. It is very often exactly the contrary: not only they belong to the system that creates insecurity and violence, but they even constitute one of its

ideological cores, that needs to be analysed, scrutinized and challenged as for its devastating effects on populations. This vision of security has created too much insecurity, on all shores of the Mediterranean. Instrumentalizations, like 40 years of alliance with Jihadists, have created insecurity. New military interventions in order to tackle situations of which the powers were themselves partly responsible, are never a good option for security.

A reflection on the nature of NATO, on its goals and ideologies is absolutely necessary, as well as a reflection on the construction of coalitions that interact with local factions in a way that has often been creating more chaos and insecurity.

Another in present ideologies. We have to strongly defy from it.