

Religious Violence, Political Ends  
Nationalism, Citizenship and Radicalizations  
in the Middle East and Europe

Edited by Marco Demichelis

# Religion and Civil Society

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## Foreword

This book is a mirrored study on the conceptualization of violence in Middle Eastern and European contemporary geography through a theoretical inter-religious and gender background, thanks to work on specific case studies.

In the last twenty years, both the narrative of the “Clash of Civilizations” in the Western world and, previously, the building process of a national identity in the Middle East’s post-colonial phase, developed and impacted on both geographies, emphasizing our inability to live in a plural society. However, as this work will clearly show, behind a detrimental attitude towards religious minorities, there is a political purpose capable of strengthening prejudices, conflicts and new fascisms.

Furthermore, in these essays the investigation is biunivocal: on the one hand, violence is regarded as the expression of an autocratic domination in a Middle East as seen through the case studies on Egypt, Iraq and Iran, and on the other hand, violence is symptomatic of a democratic European geography, France and Italy in particular, sparking off damaging reactions.

Introduced by an essay focused on the Orientalist-Occidentalist narrative of violence within Islam as a peculiarity from the beginning of its history (Ed. Said, 1978, 1981/Baruma-Margalit, 2004) and that in recent decades has been emphasized by the motto of “Islamic Supremacism”, this work is an in-depth part of a contemporary dynamic of inter-religious confrontation.

This juxtaposition, although having its roots in the debate of inter-religious conflict, has remained far from being able to deal with complex religious issues; on the contrary, the differentiation of religion assumes an ideological connotation to support discriminatory policies based on national and identity issues that have nothing to do with real differences in belief.

In recent decades, religious minorities or gender issues have become an important field of comparison between the “Western” and the Islamic world, narratively supporting autocratic desires.

More specifically, thinking about the case studies analysed before Western democracies and Arab autocracies supported a further fragmentation of Middle East (from 2003), women and religious minorities (Christians of different churches, but also Yazidis) were discriminated in relation to the ideological perspective of the modern nation-state narrative and the devolution of distinct nationalistic-religious projects:

The figure of Fatima (the Prophet's daughter), for example, as a symbol of purity and religious commitments within a new ideological perspective for Iranian women after the Revolution of 1979.

Mubarak's political need to obtain support from the Copts for his anti-terrorism policies but also to create a magnificent image of interreligious harmony, which allowed Coptic independence in community affairs, but without a real and concrete political representation in the country's institutions.

The Arabization and Ba'athification of Iraq's Christian minorities under the secularized regimes, which preceded and proceeded during the narrative of Saddam Hussein's personality cult, giving him the image of an autocratic inter-religious figure (like Hafez and Bashar al-Assad in Syria) able to preserve the unity of the country's plurality but more specifically to preserve a Christian presence in those areas.

On the other side of the Mediterranean, violence against religious minorities, in this case, whether Muslim citizens or not, is certainly less impactful, but no less dangerous, in particular in relation to the preservation of a democratic system. The radicalization process of young foreign fighters in France cannot be univocally attributed to the difficulties of integration into a secularized –highly ideological society, or, on the contrary, to Kepel's exceptionalist vision of Islam and Salafism.

The *malaise* under examination is that of a state in which the presence of a secular-republican ideology is particularly strong, but also that of some areas, parts of France, where the state is completely absent. Jihadist radicalization cannot be considered a generalized European problem if there are countries where foreign fighters are nu-

merically predominant. It is clear that there are specific French factors which have emphasized a radicalization within its no-state areas, a national “hidden” violence which has accelerated in specific parts of the country (the *banlieues*) and that shows a huge contrast with the revolutionary motto: *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*.

The Italian case, on the contrary, is less studied, difficult to interpret and curiously still free from terrorist attacks. The key to understand the Italian case is the “amateurish” political level of violence against minorities still lacking integration and rights.

It is a keg of gunpowder, but Italians are blissfully unaware of it. The lack of Italian citizenship for children born in the country to parents who are recognized and integrated in the state, will produce evident identity difficulties in future decades; the Islamophobic attitude of the Italian media, on the other hand, will clearly risk increasing the “acceleration” factor previously seen in the French case, increasing, as is already evident, the citizens' fearful approach to inter-religious and inter-cultural dynamics.

Finally, Italian political instability and the inability to find social-political continuity in the party coalition programmes, in particular concerning topics related to minorities and migrants, have clearly developed an ineffective capability to find coherent solutions.

The debate remains open, on the contrary: the possibility of preserving the Christian religious minorities in the Middle East and of limiting extremist right-wing and neo-fascists' political deviances in Europe is related to the capacity to properly understand these sets of problems.

These chapters were presented for the first time at an International Workshop organized with the ICS (Institute for Culture and Society) of the University of Navarra in October 2017.

We would like to express our gratitude to the ICS (Universidad de Navarra), in particular the Research group on Religion and Civil Society for the publication of this volume, and to the Marie Curie Fellowship project DeRadIslam (no. 746451) which provided economic support for the organization of the Workshop.





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# **Islamic Supremacy, The early “Islamic” century and the violence against the Other. A historical-religious perspective**

*Marco Demichelis*

## **1. Introduction. Arab or Islamic conquests? Whose Supremacism?**

The decrease of religious praxis in Western countries partially coincided with the advent of the “New Age”<sup>1</sup> and the end of the Cold War –overlooking the increasing role played by the Gulf States in the internal policies of Arab countries, shaping the “Global Jihad” approach with the support of the United States during the final confrontation with the Soviet Union (Soviet-Afghan war 1979-1989).

In parallel, the weakening of Arab-Islamic<sup>2</sup> university curricula as well as hermeneutic religious understanding in the contemporary world<sup>3</sup> clearly emerged at the same time with a major political and economic pressure pushing Islam and political leaders to play an increasing ideological role, shaping it as a form of “Political Islam”.

This became a phrasal idiom overemphasized in the media which is not that different from S. Huntington's “Clash of Civilizations”.

However, the main risk of contemporary religious violence in the Middle East and Europe, like the inability of the media to properly interpret the on-going situation, stimulated a “standardizing” representation of Islam and “oriental” geography as perennially at war, barbaric and without any possibility of “redemption”.

The absence of Western discernment of the recent events which have affected this area has increased an Islamophobic attitude based

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1 By “New Age” I define all the artificial versions and practices of distortion of non-Western religious tradition served up in particular from the '80s to a European or North American audience, usually unable to fully understand it: Native North American spirituality, Islamic Sufism, different forms of Yoga, Buddhism etc. These are just a few examples in which Western marketing speculation in the sphere of spirituality and religion has been able to bring to Western society the “dangerous” idea that all, even intimate aspects, are easily comprehensible and reproducible even though they come from a thousand year-old culture and civilization.

2 H. Djait, *Islamic Culture in Crisis: A Reflection on Civilizations in History* (London: Routledge, 2011), Ch. 4; A. Allawi, Ali, *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp.109ff., 229ff.

3 O. Roy, *La Sainte Ignorance. Les temps de la religion sans culture* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2008); R. Bettini, *Religione e Politica. L'ibridazione Islamica* (Roma: Armando Editore, 2013); H. Lauziere, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

on false prejudices, clichés and a regrettable dread of diversity that has exploded in parallel with the concern over an invasion by sub-Saharan emigrants.

The “Islamic attitude to supremacy” that short story writers and journalists have also already foreseen and depicted referring to Islam as the future majority European religious community after 2050,<sup>4</sup> is a fictional speculation not only un-supported by statistical data,<sup>5</sup> but detrimental of a concept of Islamic “*Supremacy*” which emphasized a narrative of fear, particularly evident after 9/11.

E. Said on the one hand, like A. Margalit and I. Baruma on the other, have already analyzed and described how the Old Continent and the USA have adopted since the 19<sup>th</sup> century a representing “narrative” to define the Others in order to produce an image of the “Orient” built up through our cultural stereotypes and most intimate weaknesses.<sup>6</sup>

The attitude of religious and violent Islamic “Supremacy” is one of these and in the following pages it will be discussed using a historical and a religious methodological approach.

The first one tries to clarify the “*Supremacist*” early Arab conquering campaigns as dissociated from a real and already concrete new Islamic religious identity.

Over the last forty years the historical comprehension of the first century of Islam has been deconstructed and analysed in a more interdisciplinary way; different sources: archaeological, numismatic, inter-religious etc., have greatly reshaped a previous understanding which is bringing early Islamic history towards new insights.

Historians and experts in Islamic Studies and History such as J. Wansbrough, P. Crone, U. Rubin, G. R. Hawting, F. Donner and R.

4 M. Houellebecq, *Soumission* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015); O. Fallaci, *La Forza della Ragione* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2004); Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Nomad. From Islam to America: a Personal Journey through the Clash of Civilization* (New York: Free Press, 2010); S. Gouguenheim, *Aristote au Mont S. Michel. Les Racines grecques de l'Europe Chrétienne* (Paris: Ed. Du Seuil, 2008).

5 <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/europe/> [Last access: 20.07.2018].

6 E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); *Covering Islam: how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981); A. Margalit, I. Baruma, *Occidentalism: the Western in the eyes of the enemies* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

Hoyland<sup>7</sup> have contributed, since the 1970s, to showing a new imagery of early Islamic history, inasmuch reformulating it within a more inclusive monotheistic *milieu* than a clearly identified and structured new religion (Islam).

For the first time, the advent of Islam was not described as an extremely fast experience which coincided with the extremely rapid conquering campaigns that in a century brought a huge geographical area from the border of the Indian Subcontinent to the Iberian peninsula under "Arab" control.

For the first time, the two historical events were divided and analysed separately.

To the fairly "common" question: how was it possible for the Arabs of the Peninsula to conquer this extended empire in such a short time?

R. Hoyland's reply is quite convincing:

The Arabs' victories were certainly stunning and their progress was much faster than that of settled powers like the Romans, but it is comparable with armies comprising a high proportion of nomads.<sup>8</sup>

This is historically clear, uni-vocally considering nomadic populations such as the Mongols of Genghis Khan, the Turk-Mongol hordes of Timur, Attila's Huns and the Hephthalite. It is also significant to highlight that they had tremendous conquering capabilities, even though more limited in preserving an effective state control. For this historical reason, it is important to make a major distinction

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7 J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); P. Crone, M. Hinds, *God's Caliph. Religious Authority in the first centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); P. Crone, M. Cook, *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); U. Rubin, *Muhammad the Prophet and Arabia* (London: Routledge, 2011); U. Rubin, "Al-Şamad and the High God. An Interpretation of Sura CXII", *Der Islam*, 61, 2 (1984), pp. 197-217; U. Rubin, "Quran and Tafsir. The case of 'an yadin'", *Der Islam*, 70 (1993), pp. 133-144; F. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers. At the Origin of Islam, tr. Italian, Maometto e le origini dell'Islam* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi ed., 2011); R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others saw it. A survey of evaluation as Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997).

8 R. Hoyland, *In God's path. The Arab conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 3.

between the Arab conquests from the concrete and inner elaboration of a new form of religiosity with Abrahamic roots called Islam.

Can we think about a Christian religion after Jesus' ascension? Or do we need to wait until we understand how the Christians differentiated themselves from Pharisaic Judaism? Can we talk about Islam immediately after the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632? Or do we need to wait until some clear differences emerged between this new form of religiosity and previous Abrahamic traditions?

This is the main reason why we cannot talk about “Islamic conquests” from the beginning; we probably need to wait until the first/second decade of the 8<sup>th</sup> century to start identifying the leading political rulers of this extended empire as the Caliph of a new religious community “in progress.”<sup>9</sup>

The first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century is a historical phase in which the Arab conquests were already ending, as was the first Arab empire in history, the Umayyad empire (661-750).

What historiography has always shown is a paradigmatic date, usually adopted to distinguish different periods: the Fall of the Roman Western Empire in 476 has a great meaning for European historiography, but is quite limited in relation to the eastern part of the Mediterranean where late Antiquity merged with the early Islamic age. Historical passages are usually not so catastrophic, but need time to be absorbed.

This is also clear in relation to “oral transmission” and “religious revelations” which for many reasons –historical, linguistic, geographical and logical– do not follow the common “collecting traditions” that are usually attributed to them. The 'Abbasid Islamic narrative which historically clarifies how the third *Khulafa al-Rashidin*, 'Othman ibn 'Affan (d. 656) gathered the early *Mushaf* (today's meaning: collection) from seven or nine versions into a canonical one, shaping three or four copies which were sent to the cities of Damascus, Basra and Kufa, while one probably remained in Medina, can be properly considered as a real fact with difficulty and even if it were

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9 A. Fuess, J.-P. Hartung, *Court Cultures in the Muslim World. Seventh to nineteenth century* (London: SOAS/Routledge Studies on the Middle East, 2011), pp. 21-90.

true, a few copies of God's revelation cannot make a new religion already rooted within a new extended geography.<sup>10</sup>

The complexity of this topic cannot be discussed here in full, as the interdisciplinary multi-factorial analysis would be too complex. However, a few logical and non-literary aspects need to be briefly considered to introduce the main reasons for this scepticism:

1. Archaeological and numismatic findings (such as tombstones), at least until now, have clarified that we need to wait until the Marwanid phase (684-750) in Umayyad history and more specifically the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (685-705) to discover a “complete” profession of the Islamic faith (*Shahada*) with the full declaration: “*There is no god but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God*” with the Muhammad's allusion also appearing on Umayyad coins, tombstones of “believers” and religious buildings.

This initial absence suggested that Muhammad's importance was not so great, probably for different reasons starting from the non-believers' contribution to the Arab conquering campaigns, or the military support for the Sufyanid Umayyad dynasty (661-684) offered by the Arab Christian confederation (Banu Kalb, Banu Ghassan) in the Syrian area.<sup>11</sup>

2. The early Arab conquering campaigns were certainly led by Caliphs such as Abu Bakr and 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, generals such as Khalid ibn al-Walid and 'Amr ibn al-'As, prominent figures in the community of the “believers”. However, two outstanding aspects, that are not usually considered, need to be discussed: (1) part of the conquering forces were members of semi-nomadic populations and

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10 Th. Nöldeke, Fr. Schwally, G. Bergsträßer, O. Preztl, *The History of the Qur'an*, ed. and tr. by Wolfgang H. Behn (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 209ff.; Th. Nöldeke, *The Qur'an: An introductory essay*, N. A. Newman (ed.) (Hayfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1992); A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai, M. Marx, *The Qur'an in context. Historical and literary investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 255ff., 281ff., 407ff.

11 J. Johns, “Archaeology and the History of Islam: the first seventy years”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 46, 4 (2003), pp. 411-436; Younis al-Shdaifat, Ahmad al-Jallad, Zeyad al-Salameen, Rafe Harahsheh, “An early Christian Arabic Graffito mentioning Yazid, the king”, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 28 (2017), pp. 315-324; A. Elad, “Why did 'Abd al-Malik build the Dome of the Rock? A re-examination of the Muslim Sources”, *Bayt of Maqdis, 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 33-58.

Bedouin fighters who had not yet been Islamicized, who a few months earlier had fought in the Ridda wars (632-633) against the Hijazi tentative to make them respect the agreements previously signed when Muhammad was still alive.<sup>12</sup> (2) In the first phase after the Prophet's death, and probably when Muhammad was still alive, the early community of the believers was not hierarchically structured as described by the Islamic narrative in the following centuries: Muhammad was an eminent member but with strong connections with others important figures as Abu Bakr, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, Khalid ibn Sa'id, Uthman ibn Mazhum etc. in a sort of polycentric community in which relevant decisions were more based on consensus and arbitration. This is probably also one of the main reasons why the "religious" figure of Muhammad did not emerge immediately after his death in 632, but important policies were implemented in contrast with previous conclusions.<sup>13</sup>

3. The Arabian Peninsula confederate clan system was partially already absorbed in the Byzantine and Sasanian empires in the same way as the "German" populations were in the Western Roman empire at the end of it; at the same time, both empires had important urban areas (Damascus, Antioch, Edessa, Jerusalem, Ctesiphon, Nineveh, Gaza, Caesarea etc.) surrounded by countryside that was already inhabited by Arabs (but not only by them). It is important to imagine that in the 6th century, as well as during the devastating Byzantine-Sasanian war (602-628), a part of the northern Arab confederation tribes of the Peninsula, many of them monophysite Christians, were fighting each other as "*Foederati*" in the armies of both empires. The war ended in 628 with a Byzantine victory under Heraclius, but after that the Persians had previously conquered Palestine, Syria, Egypt and part of Anatolia in 613-615, with a huge destruction of urban territor-

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12 F. Donner, *The early Islamic conquests*, pp. 96ff.; *Muhammad and the Believers. At the Origin of Islam*, pp. 139ff.

13 R. Hoyland, *In God's Path*, pp. 56-65; F. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, pp. 98-110; *Muhammad and the Believers. At the Origin of Islam*, pp. 41ff.; G. M. Morony, "Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 17, 2, (1974), pp. 113-135; M. Haddad, "'Umar ibn al-Khattab and the Meccan Aristocracy", *Chronos*, 6 (2002), pp. 163-170; Al-Madani, M., *Nazrat fi Ijtihadar al-Faruq 'Umar ibn al-Khattab* (Beirut: Dar al-Nafa'is, 1990).



ies. This highlights the state of uncertainty of the entire region of Mesopotamia and Bilad al-Sham after 628, including probably the part of Arab confederate system that survived.<sup>14</sup>

The points above partially emphasize some of the main reasons why at the beginning of the "Arab" conquests (633- 656), in particular in Egypt, the Tigris and Euphrates plains and the Syria-Palestine region, the focus on a new religious identity of the conquerors was not clarified or supported by new local governors. To define them as "Islamic conquests" would be a way to highlight an "Islamic religious identity" which was fairly non-existent at least at the end of 'Abd al-Malik's caliphate (705) and of the second Fitna, when, the political clash between Umayyads, the Alid party and the followers of 'Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr (d. 692) greatly increased an anti-Umayyad propaganda detrimental to their real religious identity.<sup>15</sup>

This is the main reason why, when in contemporary times western media but also academia began to "elaborate" a narrative on an "Islamic Supremacist" attitude emphasizing how from the beginning this Abrahamic religion supported "conquering" attitudes, it would have been more relevant to highlight that the first century of "Islamic" history is so complex and so partially illustrated that we should be more cautious in supporting certain statements about the Jihad "state" and similar positions.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Abd al- Raziq, *Al- Khilafa wa-usul al-hukm* (Cairo: 1925); Al-Baladhuri, *Kitab Futuh al-Buldan*, tr. by Ph. Hitti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), 2 vols.; Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam, *Sirat 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-Aziz*, ed. Ahmad 'Ubayd (Beirut: 1965); Jawad Ali, *Al-Mufasssal fi Tarikh al-'Arab qabl al-Islam* (Beirut: 1978), pp. 24ff.; Kh. 'Athamina, "The pre-Islamic roots of the Early Muslim Caliphate: the emergence of Abu Bakr", pp. 1-32; Ph. Wood, "Christians and the Arabs in the sixth century", G. Fisher, J. Djiskra, *Inside and Out: interactions between Rome and the people of the Arabian and Egyptian frontiers in late antiquity* (Leuven: Peeters 2014), pp. 353-368.

15 G. Rotten, *Die Umayyaden und die zweite Bürgerkrieg (680-692)* (Weisbaden: Steiner, 1982); F. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers. At the Origin of Islam*, pp. 185ff., 204ff.

16 D. Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Oakland: California of University Press, 2005); Kh. Yahya Blankinship, *The End of Jihad State: The reign of Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik and the collapse of the Umayyads* (New York: Suny Press, 1994); A. G. Bostom, *The Legacy of Jihad* (New York: Prometheus Book, 2008); D. Hayden, *Muhammad and the Birth of Islamic Supremacism: the War with the Jews 622-628 A.D.* (New York: Bird Brain Production, 2012); L. B. Jackson, *Islamophobia in Britain: the Making of a Muslim Enemy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp.

## 2. The historical debate in recent decades: revisionists and reformists

The words that I have used to define the dual scientific approach that affected Academia in recent decades considering the early century after the death of the prophet Muhammad (d. 632), are “*revisionism*” and “*reformism*”: the first highlights an innovative scientific approach which is added to those previously used, but also a theoretical outcome that usually goes beyond the real investigative result; the second, on the contrary, emphasizes a clearer attention on what can be verified using the same interdisciplinary methodological approach, but without any kind of excessive revisionist attitude.

This duplicity does not want to favour an internal clash showing a clear preference; both are necessary and the former usually puts forward an interesting thesis which is partially confirmed by the latter; however, clear differences persist in identifying *reformists* as more engaged in preserving a less revolutionary historical attitude, while the *revisionists* are often more likely to innovate without real support from the sources, but with a greater capability of insight.

A. Noth's *Quellenkritische Untersuchungen zu Themen, Formen und Tendenzen frühislamischer Geschichtsüberlieferung*, published in 1970,<sup>17</sup> played a relevant role, even though it was not translated into English until many years after its German edition, because for the first time it considered a textual critical analysis of “Islamic conquests” and the first Muslim century using studies of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Gospels.

In parallel, G. Lüling in *Über den Ur-Koran* (Erlangen, 1974) assumed as many other Western scholars did, that the Qur'an was not only the word of God, but more drastically the elaboration of Muhammad's own life and thought and tried to understand it in the context of the standard Islamic biography, the *Sira al-Nabawiyya*. Lüling's work was deeply criticised for its unfounded and arbitrary thesis, such as that the Prophet was a Christian at the beginning; how-

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184-185.; R. Spencer, *Confessions of an Islamophobe* (Brentwood: Bombardier Books, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> The essay in its second edition was subsequently translated into English by Michael Bonner, with the title *The Early Islamic Historical Tradition*, A. Noth, L. I. Conrad (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994).

ever, his methodological approach more than his theoretical outcomes persisted, being adopted to implement future investigation into Early Islamic History.

A stronger and clear revisionist formulation emerged in particular after the publication of J. Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies* and P. Crone-Michael Cook's *Hagarism: the Making of the Islamic World*. The former supports the idea that the Quranic text became a definitive canon of scripture only a couple of centuries after Muhammad's death, hazarding and this is more convincing, that the Prophet in Mecca did not try to found a new religion, but a "milieu" able to convince all the most important inter-clan confederations of the Peninsula. This is an idea which obtains increasing support with the Western Historiography of the Middle East, in particular in the writings of F. M. Donner and R. G. Hoyland.<sup>18</sup> In other words, in the first century, Islam was not Islam yet, but a more comprehensive and inclusive monotheistic creed with a praxis and doctrine that were still uncertain.

The latter, in continuity with a few previous essays, emphasized the use of non-Arabic primary sources only because they were increasingly suspected of being historically weak and apologetic, with manuscripts in Greek, Armenian, Syriac, old-Persian, Coptic and Hebrew of the 7th century, which could not ignore "prominent" conquering campaigns coming from the Arab Peninsula. However, Crone-Cook's revisionist narrative in some occasions emerged as a little too surprising, in particular concerning the idea that after the eviction of Jews by the Byzantines, many of them reached Muhammad's forces conquering the Holy Land, in particular Jerusalem, with the Prophet still alive and supporting the Arab campaigns.

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18 F. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The beginnings of Islamic Historical writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), pp. 132ff.; *The Early Islamic Conquests*, pp. 251ff.; *Muhammad and the Believers. At the Origin of Islam*, pp. 214ff.; "The formation of the Islamic State", *JAOS*, 106, 2, (1986), pp. 283-296; "Centralized Authority and Military Autonomy in the Early Islamic Conquests", *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, A. Cameron (ed.) (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995); R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others saw it. A survey of evaluation as Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), pp. 53ff.; "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State", *BSOAS*, 69, 3, (2006), pp. 395-416; "Epigraphy and the Emergence of Arab Identity", *From al-Andalus to Khurasan. Documents from the Medieval Muslim World*, AA.VV. (eds.) (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 220-242.

This thesis is clearly related to the Emperor Heraclius' anti-Judaic stance after the insurrection in Palestine against the Byzantines during the Sasanian invasion of the Romans territories in the first phase of the war between Constantinople and Ctesiphon (602-628).<sup>19</sup>

Regardless of some indefensible theories, the “revisionist” works revitalized the study of early Islam and *Hagarism* remains an important essay for its multilingual methodological approach; at the same time, a less revisionist group of Scholars, “reformists”, following Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), developed a broadened perspective, reformulating the historical age of Late Antiquity and the use of archaeological and numismatic sources implementing the possibility of a better understanding of the early Islamic age.

Coins, Arabic papyrology and new archaeological findings closely connected with Byzantine or Sasanian studies, have started in recent decades to re-shape the historical comprehension of the seventh century, reformulating the understanding of this crucial period with a more solid basis.<sup>20</sup>

However, in this case too, some studies have favoured deeply revisionist theories which have developed fairly imaginative premises, like Volker Popp's<sup>21</sup> idea that the Byzantine defeat was a Sasanian post 627-628 counteroffensive<sup>22</sup> led by Christian Nestorians with local and rural anti-Constantinople discontent.

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19 Eutychius, *Das Annalenwerk des Eutychios von Alexandrien*, ed. and trans. M. Breydy (Louvain: 1985), pp. 471-472, Sebeos (attrib), *Histoire d'Héraclius par l'évêque Sébéos*, trans. F. Macler, (Paris: 1904); R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others saw it*, pp. 540ff., Ch. F. Robinson, *Empires and Elites after the Muslim Conquests* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 23, 41, 56-57.

20 P. Pentz, *The Invisible Conquest. The Ontogenesis of Sixth and Seventh Century Syria* (Copenhagen: The National Museum of Denmark, 1992); F. M. Donner, “Visions of the Early Islamic expansion: from the Heroic to the Horrific”, *Byzantium in Early Islamic Syria*, N. El-Cheick, S. O'Sullivan (eds.) (Beirut: American University of Beirut and Balamand: University of Balamand, 2011), pp. 9-29.

21 V. Popp, “Die Frühe Islamgeschichte nach inschriftlichen und numismatischen Zeugnissen”, *Die dunklen Anfänge. Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, K.-H. Ohling, G.-R. Puin (eds.) (Berlin: Schiler, 2005), pp. 16-123.

22 After Heraclius' victorious campaigns against the Sasanian-Persian, Paravaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanian-Parthian confederacy and the Arab conquest of Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp. 161ff.

Another one is Y. Nevo's hypothesis that the Arab confederation was strengthened against the Byzantines, whose increased religious fragmentation in Syria and Egypt favoured at the beginning their control in the area, being defeated by the Umayyad empowerment, also thanks to their major and historically rooted economic duty in the Damascus region.<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding, neither case is based on solid roots because they do not consider the historical background of internal Christians contradistinctions and the complexity of the inter-tribal relationship of the Arab clans; however, some intuitions should be reconsidered in relation to new evidence.

Many revisionist theories have the merit of having developed a concrete interdisciplinary analysis of this "obscure" historical period; however, the large amount of recently added information usually needs a certain period of "incubation" and a very broad analytical capacity able to appease and rationalize the plurality of this interdisciplinary understanding. This capability relates all singular historical events in connection with a literary understanding of it, a better comprehension of the Qur'an, a geographical and sociological ability to distinguish urban from rural areas and an aptitude to read events through a broad analytical spectrum.

The contemporary age of "religious nationalism"<sup>24</sup> in the Middle East, recently developed another analytical trend according to which Arab-Islamic expansion was more linked to a formative Arab national identity than to a real and new religious one,<sup>25</sup> while on the other hand, other scholars<sup>26</sup> have developed the idea that Islam was subject from the beginning to a strongly monotheistic impact and this impulse re-

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23 Y. Nevo, J. Koren, *Crossroads to Islam. The Origins of the Arab Region and the Arab State* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).

24 M. Demichelis, P. Maggiolini, *The Struggle to Define a Nation. Rethinking Religious Nationalism in Contemporary Islamic World* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017).

25 S. Bahear, *Arabs and Others in Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997); R. Hoyland, *In God's Path: the Arab conquest and the creation of an Islamic Empire*, pp. 207ff.

26 J. Waardenburg, "Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam according to its relations with Other Religions", *The Qur'an. Style and Contents*, A. Rippin (ed.) (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 93-115; Y. D. Nevo, Z. Cohen, D. Heftmann, *Ancient Arabic Inscriptions from the Negev* (Jerusalem: IPS Press, 1993).

cognized in previous Prophets (*Anbiya'*) and Messengers (*Rusul*) (Moses and Jesus specifically), a Unitarian background (the *hanifiyya*) with a still unclear Islamic identity: this thesis, with the passing of the decades, is becoming more convincing.<sup>27</sup>

In parallel, all the lucubrations of the revisionists as well as those of the reformists cannot be properly considered without understanding the genesis of the Qur'an as the historical information contained in the revelation.

The lack of critical editions of the Qur'an which affected for many centuries western and Islamic geography, like the clear delay in its study, has been only partially remedied by Nöldeke-Scwhally-Bergsträßer-Pretzl, *Geschichte des Qoran*, as well as by R. Bell's revisionist attitude.

The works published after the discovery of the old Qur'an manuscripts in the Great Mosque of Şan'a' in 1972, like those following Prof. G. Bergsträßer's and O. Pretzl's archive microfilms and photo collections of the Qur'an, reappeared a few years ago and were given to Prof. A. Neuwirth. They have remained fairly miraculous, but particularly relevant in trying to get answers about the origin of the Islamic religion, its revelation and its initial socio-political structure.

The relationship between early historical and Quranic studies is clearly prominent. Every historical revisionist and reformist hypothesis needs a major understanding which possibly is confirmed or can be confirmed not only by numismatic, archaeological and non-Arabic literary sources, but also in the hermeneutic comprehension of the Muslim revelation, in particular if the discovery of early manuscripts is going to change the scriptural version of God's word.

All the questions related to the early Arab conquering campaigns, the primordial Arab-Islamic state and the empire as the inter-religious relationship within it, could drastically modify their answers, with a great impact on early Islamic studies.

### **3. Western “Supremacism” and the race debate**

All the above studies, like their interdisciplinary methodological approach have deeply affected Western academic works on Early Is-

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<sup>27</sup> F. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers. At the origins of Islam*, pp. 204ff.; R. Hoyland, *In God's Path*, pp. 207ff.

lamic history in recent decades. However, in parallel, a previous academic tradition had elaborated from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a first "Orientalist" early understanding of Islamic culture and history as deeply imbued with post-Enlightenment and positivist European values and attitudes.<sup>28</sup>

This Western "Supremacist" attitude did not come to an end with the de-colonization phase, but has continued through a different methodology and tools in which the first use of the mass media also increased the impact of political and religious propaganda.

For the vast majority of Islamic countries as for the Arabs more specifically, the phases of post-colonialism (1946-1991) and the post-Cold War (1991-today) have not identified a concrete improvement in institutional solidity; in any case the failed "Arab Springs" (2011) increased the anarchy in previously stable autocratic states. The Middle Eastern<sup>29</sup> conflicts which erupted from the beginning of the decolonization process highlighted internal economic, political and religious clashes which usually assumed an increasing class fragmentation linked to internal and external reasons.

Assuming a general overview, all the Middle Eastern countries were involved in the Cold War (1946-1991). However, the real peculiarity of this historical phase was that the Arab world passed from being an auxiliary of the Soviet Union until the end of the 1960s, to opening their economy to the free market (*Infitah*) so as to decree a clear independence from the Seven Sisters in the hydrocarbon- energy market as well.

The failure of Pan-Arabism and the Arab socialist ideologies which emphasized secular culture as well as religious reformists atti-

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28 A. Hourani, *Islam and the European Thought* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 54ff.; B. Lewis, *What went wrong? The clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003); Z. Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East. The History and Politics of Orientalism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2ed., 2009).

29 Geographical terms are usually significant to identify countries and areas. In this work the term "Islamic world" identifies the entire area in which a majority or minority Islamic community is established, from South East Asia, the Philippines to Paraguay; the term "Middle East" is comprehensive of the Arab world, plus Turkey and Iran, finally, the Arab world, inclusive of the Maghreb, the Mashrek and the Arabian peninsula is to be considered in its entirety, from Syria to Yemen and from Oman to Mauritania.

tudes, coincided with, quoting Oliver Roy: “[...] a re-inculturation of Islam within an ongoing globalizing world, secularized *de facto*”.<sup>30</sup> This “Islamic revanchism” emphasized the conservative attitudes of Islamic culture in contrast with the opening of the internal market as the ulterior exploitation of the masses which on one hand had been deeply re-Islamicized, while, on the other, they were losing every chance to shape a welfare system. The same system that at the beginning, in the 1930s, the Muslim Brotherhood association would have like to improve.<sup>31</sup>

The great majority of Arabs were convinced of being stricter and more conservative Muslims while they were losing, decade after decade (from the 1970s to the 1990s), the possibility of achieving a more balanced social and economic society.

This “trapping” system was not only particularly useful for prolonging autocratic control and regimes with the “Democratic” support of the United States and EU, but emphasized the creation of an ideological Islamic “supremacist” attitude nurtured by the petro-dollar Emirates simply by updating the most exclusivist and violent praxis and ideas that every religion has shaped within a long historical formative process.

In parallel, they identified in Western “Orientalist” narratives their *alter ego*, exploiting and defining an “Orientalism in reverse” among Islamists which produced a mixture of anti-Christian and Judaic literature with Classical Ḥanbalite authors such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328/728) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350/751) as with clear “Occidentalists” *cliché*: the non-religiosity of the West, the lack of Western moral values, previous European anti-Judaic Semitism etc.<sup>32</sup>

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30 O. Roy, *La Sainte Ignorance. Les temps de la religion sans culture*, pp. 233ff.

31 A. Belkeziz, *The State in Contemporary Islamic Thought. A Historical Survey of the Major Muslim Political Thinkers of the Modern Age* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 128ff.; M. Zahid, *The Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt's succession crisis. The Politics of Liberalisation and Reform in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 39ff.; M. Campanini, *L'alternativa Islamica* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2012), pp. 94ff.

32 B. Tibi, *Islam's predicament with Modernity. Religious Reform and cultural change* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 209ff.; I. Buruma, A. Margalit, *Occidentalism: the west in the eyes of its enemies* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004); W. B. Hal-



The lower and middle classes were easily convinced of it, in parallel, the academic crisis of the Humanities, like the anti-democratic US foreign policy in the region, in particular after the terrorists attacks of 9/11, boosted the theory of a "Clash of Civilizations".

Huntington's premise, although methodologically abstruse, followed a twofold Islamic religious attitude, which emerged in particular after the failure of Arab left-wing ideologies: the political ideology of the religious and the denial of the plurality background in Islam.

The former aspect was clearly emphasized to promote a better political control of society so as to give the impression that religious praxis was again in the lead;<sup>33</sup> the latter accentuated the inter-religious fraction highlighting a "Supremacist" attitude as an anti-democratic approach.<sup>34</sup>

The main problem, as argued by B. Tibi is that:

The overall inner-Islamic debate on the self and authenticity remains under the influence of an Arab word that generates valid standards for the prevailing attitudes that shape Islamic civilization. [...] Thus, the embracing of pluralism between religions by Muslims, as a cultural requirements for placing the non-Muslim other on an equal footing, is flatly rejected by Islamists and Salafism alike.<sup>35</sup>

If B. Tibi includes the Islamic *supremacist* attitude in the contemporary debate on democracy, religious and gender equality and human rights, the deconstruction of this aspect is particularly relevant

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laq, *Restating Orientalism: a critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

33 M. Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a radical age, religious authority and internal criticism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2012); G. Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt. The Prophet and Pharaoh* (Berkeley: California of University Press, 1985), pp. 103ff.

34 Bat Ye'or, *Islam and Dhimmitude, where civilizations collide* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), pp. 201ff.; *Eurabia: the Euro-Arab axis* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005); *Europe, Globalization and the coming of Universal Caliphate* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011); *Understanding Dhimmitude* (New York: RVP Press, 2013); *Le Dhimmi: Profil de l'opprimé en Orient et en Afrique du Nord depuis la Conquete Arabe* (Paris: Editeur Anthropos, 1980); *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam, from Jihad to Dhimmitude* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).

35 Ibid., p. 229.

because artificially shaped, starting from a non-Islamic matrix conceptualization, but clearly linked to a Western social and cultural background.

I. Baruma and A. Margalit in *Occidentalism* also highlighted the way in which European anti-Semitism was culturally absorbed within Islamic anti-Judaism and anti-Zionism;<sup>36</sup> the use of the term *Supremacism* has nothing in common with Islamic history or thought but again with the Western one; in the 19th century, during colonialism, the “White's man burden” was usually identified in the Anglo-Saxon world with the moral obligation of bringing “civilization” to other societies, justifying *de facto*, all imperialist policies as a noble endeavour.<sup>37</sup>

The Scotsman Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) in his historical work on the French Revolution,<sup>38</sup> argued that European *supremacist* policies were justified because they provided a better benefit for the “native” populations; however, his approach to the employment of a “supremacist” attitude had nothing in common with a concrete religious awareness of superiority, as emerged in his following essay entitled: *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*.<sup>39</sup> In this work, he compared a wide range of different kinds of heroic figures from Odin to Muhammad, from Oliver Cromwell to Napoleon, passing through Martin Luther, John Knox, Dante and Shakespeare and he gave particular attention to the Islamic Prophet describing him as a reformist figure, able to transform the Bedouin Arab tribes' lifestyle into a deeply civilized nation in a limited period of time.

In this case, the figure of Muhammad is understood and appreciated in relation with his historical and reformist capability, like those of religious figures such as Martin Luther and John Knox, in the following chapters,<sup>40</sup> showing how Carlyle's “*Supremacist*” formulation is not connected with a “religious” sense of belonging, but more a racial-anthropological one. Heroes are those who confirm themselves within

36 I. Baruma, A. Margalit, *Occidentalism*, pp. 91ff.

37 S. C. Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation: The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899-1903* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 5.

38 Th. Carlyle, *The French Revolution. A History* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1837).

39 Th. Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: James Fraser, 1841), pp. 41ff.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 112ff.

a life process, accepting its cruelty as necessary and as part of its evolution. For them bravery is a more valuable virtue than love; heroes are noblemen, not saints, emphasizing a clear dissociation from a religious approach, which is probably one of the main reasons for Nietzsche's appreciation of this work. Muhammad is recognized as a great Man and Hero not because he brought a new religion into existence, but for his important role as a Prophetic figure, a vital reformist who brought light into the darkness of the Arab nation.

In the following decades, the meaning of *Supremacism* assumed a more evident racial understanding. Before the United States' Civil War, the Confederate states of America founded a constitution that implemented the segregation policy as the clear superiority of white people over "Negroes". In the *Cornerstone Speech* (21 March 1861), Alexander Stephens, the Confederate Vice-President, declared: "Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition." This was an assumption that after the Civil War continued to be patronized by the KKK secret society, which had the main aim of restoring White *Supremacism* during the reconstruction period.

We need to wait until the beginning of the 20th century for the foundation of the second KKK in Atlanta to consider "White Supremacism" ideology as not only related with the "racial factor", but with the religious one, in particular the flourishing of an "One hundred per cent Americanism" theorization against Catholics, Jews and other religious minorities. Their "Supremacist" positions were directly linked with the newly arrived southern European emigrants, such as the Italians, or catholic Irish, who were becoming numerically visible in the main urban areas of the USA.

On the contrary, as a racial-religious reply, we need to wait until the 1960s and the debate on the "segregation" status in the southern United States to consider the establishment of a "Black Supremacist" ideology as well as a Black theology of liberation for

African-Americans, approached by the philosopher Cornel West “*au rebours*” from the side of the oppressed.<sup>41</sup>

In spite of this, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, different racial “Supremacist” attempts came into being during which a state or an ethnic ideological propaganda highlighted the superiority of a race over those in the same geographical area: the German myth of the Aryan race adopted by Nazism was specular to the Empire of Japan's long-standing concept of *hakko ichiu* which declared the superiority of the Yamato race over all those conquered in south East Asia during its military campaigns before World War II. The South African apartheid system is historically considered one of the last “White supremacist” regimes in the contemporary world which considered itself part of a superior race with a deep impact on the legislation of a state system.

At the same time, “Arab Supremacism” in particular in Africa is historically related with the relevant function that slavery played since early Arab-Islamic domination in the regions of Mauritania and Sudan from the 10th century<sup>42</sup>.

However, it is important to clarify as shown above, that the conceptualization of “Supremacism” did not assume a religious identity in recent centuries, as the contemporary attribution to Islam seems to emphasize.

The term under examination started to be adopted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, continuing into the following one, but in a clear racial and ethnic “milieu”.

Its adoption and attribution to Islam, in recent decades, is more related to Islamophobia than to a real “Religious Supremacist” attitude, at least in relation to a Western geography in which statistical projections underscore how the European Muslim population will remain under a percentage of 15% for 2050.<sup>43</sup>

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41 C. West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times: Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1993).

42 P. E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery. A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2ed. 2000).

43 <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/europe/>

#### 4. Conclusion. Western colonialism, Islamic Supremacism and Religious minorities

Baruma and Margalit also highlight in *Occidentalism* the adoption of racist and anti-Semitic positions in the Islamic world as an expression of Western colonialist and post-colonialism cultural influence; the idea of a religious "Islamic Supremacism" is again the expression of a conceptualization shaped in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Saxon western world without, at least, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a concrete religious background.

This "Islamic Supremacism" propaganda shows us that a "Clash of Civilizations" ideology is clearly winning, even though many differences emerged between Egypt and Indonesia for example, or between Tunisia-Morocco and Saudi Arabia, in particular if we consider the reforms in recent years.<sup>44</sup>

One of the main difficulties of inter-disciplinary contemporary studies is the inability to promote an analysis "*au rebours*" able to clarify the passages which brought the ongoing situation as antithetic with the previous state of affairs.

Moreover, academic-scientific incongruence becomes evident when high impact revolutionary events accentuate new discernment of interpretation, shaping popular understanding as worsening human relationships and plurality. This is the case of the 9/11 terrorists attacks.

If previously, relevant as well as questionable works such as Bat Ye'or essays<sup>45</sup> highlighted and theorised the "fragile" status of *Dhimmi* in Arab lands, her more recent works, like those by A. Bostom, K. Yahya Blankship and D. Cook on *Jihad*, have favoured the "false" understanding that religious- violence within Islam was a common practice from its expansionist and conquering campaigns of the first century (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries).

Their theoretical perspective is clearly rooted in the "inter-religious violence" in the Qur'an, in the Traditions of the Prophet, concerning the early Islamic treatises of *Jihad* like the famous Ibn al-Mubarak (d. 797) *Kitab al-Jihad*, one of the first published on the ar-

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44 T. Bassam, *Islam's predicament with Modernity*, p. 236.

45 Bat Ye'or, *Le Dhimmi: Profil de l'opprimé en Orient et en Afrique du Nord depuis la Conquete Arabe* (Paris: Editeur Anthropos, 1980); *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam, from Jihad to Dhimmitude* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).

gument, like those by Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani (d. 805), *Kitab al-Siyar al-Saghir* and Abu Ishaq al-Fazari (d.804) or on Ibn 'Omar al-Waqidi al-Aslami (d. 823) *Kitab al-Maghazi* and *Kitab al-Futuh* (properly attributed to a pseudo-Waqidi author).<sup>46</sup>

However, if concerning violence in the Qur'an, in particular against non- Muslims, the analysis needs a specific comprehension in a hermeneutic study also in relation with the "creation" of a Quranic "milieu", the ongoing debate on the complete collection of this Revelation is still at the beginning, according to the historical sources which already clarify low- intensive intra-religious fighting activities during the Arabs' *Futuh* (conquering campaigns).

On the contrary, the *Sunna* shows a huge analytical range between condemnation and approval which is established in a historical Islamic period of great confusion and artificial creation of singular *Hadith* which scientifically and partially disempower their credibility.<sup>47</sup>

The contemporary debate on the authenticity of the Islamic Tradition shows us one of the major inconsistencies between reciprocal Western and Islamic academic comprehension, at least, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>48</sup>

In spite of this, the historical-theoretical approach which identified a *Jihadist* Islamic attitude from the beginning must still be proven and clearly supported, also because Ibn al-Mubarak's *Kitab al-Jihad*, and all the above texts were thought out and written in the second half

46 A. Ibn al-Mubarak, *Kitab al-Jihad* (Beirut: Dar an-Nur, 1971); M. Khadduri, *The Islamic Law of Nations, Shaybani's Siyar* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1966); F. Hammada, *Kitab al-Siyar li-saghir al-Islam Abi Ishaq al-Fazari* (Beirut: 1987), pp. 13-86; Al-Waqidi, *Kitab al-Maghazi* (Beirut: 'Alam al-Kutub, 1984); J. Wellhausen, *Mohammed in Medina. Das ist Vakidi's Kitab al-Maghazi in verkurzter deutscher Wiedergabe* (Berlin: Reimer, 1882).

47 Racha el-Omari, "Accommodation and Resistance: classical Mu'tazilites on ḥadīth", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 71, 2, (2012), pp. 231-256; E. Dickinson, *The Development of early Sunnite Ḥadīth criticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); S. C. Lucas, *Constructive Critics. Ḥadīth literature and the articulation of Sunni Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); G. H. A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition, Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Ḥadīth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

48 D. F. Womack, "The authenticity and authority of Islam. Muhammad Rashid Rida's response to Twentieth-century Missionary publications", *Social Science and Missions*, 28, 1-2, (2015), pp. 89-115.

of the 8th century, during the early 'Abbasid period, when the phase of the first "Islamic conquests" was completely over.<sup>49</sup>

Bat Ye'or's approach has already been deeply criticised by historians such as R. B. Betts and by the main expert of Semitic Studies, S. Griffith. However, an evident merit of Ye'or's thesis is the criticism of an excessively naive "*convivencia*" understanding of the Islamic World, that as well as her hypothesis on *Dhimmitude* haphazardly assumed quite ideological positions.

Moreover, after 9/11, the subsequent terrorist attacks in Europe and the USA have concretely emphasized an Islamophobic attitude through which it has been easy to achieve a deep sense of rejection and disdain towards a world that is usually not known and of which it is easy to have only a rough understanding. The passage to identify Islam as a "Supremacist" religion historically rooted from the beginning in violence, and forced conversions<sup>50</sup> is really effortless, in particular if framed by the concept of *Jihad*.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, the historical reality is quite different: the Crusades, the *Reconquista*, Colonialism and post-Colonialism underline how, if the religious-political concept of *Jihad* has existed from the II century of Islamic age as expressions of personal internal struggle of every believer on the path of God (*Jihad fi sabili-llah*), we need to consider that it was profoundly restored from the 1950s assuming a most violent offensive anti-colonialist and aggressive connotation<sup>52</sup>.

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49 The battle of Talas (751) fought between an Abbasid army with the support of the Tibetans against a Chinese Tang army in what is today Kyrgyzstan, like the battle of Poitiers/Tours of 732 challenged by an Umayyad army against Charles Martel and Odo, Duke of Aquitaine's men, are historically considered the concrete conflicts which at least for the next three centuries were to set a limit on the expansion of the Muslim armies (Indus River on the eastern side like Pyrenees on the Western one).

50 All historical sources agree in highlighting how for the first couple of centuries, in the "Islamic" empires, the "Muslims" remained a religious minority until at least the end of the 9th century, the beginning of the 10th. A. Hourani, *A History of the Arab People* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), pp. 41-48; H. Goddard, *Christians and Muslims: from Double standards to mutual understanding* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 126-131; I. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 200-201.

51 N. Massaoumi, T. Mills, D. Miller, *What is Islamophobia? Racism, Social Movements and the State* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), pp. 35ff.

52 S. Qutb, *Milestones*, A. B. el-Mehri (ed.) (Birmingham: Maktabah Publishers, 2006); S. Khatib, "Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyya in the thought of Sayyid Qutb",

Very different is the concrete Islamic “Supremacist” attitude assumed against religious and ethnic minorities in the Muslim majority countries in the last decades of the 20th century. In this case the debate is quite significant, in particular if we compare the plural and inter-religious society of the last Islamic empires-Ottoman, Safavid and Moghul-before the contemporary period, with the European religious wars in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

However, if the *Cuius Regio Eius Religio* doctrine purified Western European countries from internal religious dissent, the Islamic world, generally more “tolerant” until the contemporary age, during colonialism discovered the ideology of “state-nationalism” internally developing a clear fragmentation in which the religious minorities usually became the “sacrificial lamb”.

Colonialism deeply affected inter-religious relationships in the Middle East: every internal reform (*Tanzimat*) was perceived by the Muslim majority as being an imposition of European countries which was clearly favouring the Christian minorities, rather than a requirement perceived by the people. This prominent passage needs to be better explored to properly understand the main reasons behind the failure of the concept of citizenship in the late Ottoman Empire. The most important cases can be broadly summarized as follows:

The Ottoman inability to equalize the *Berat* trade; as reported in the E. I., “[...] the *Berat* were originally distributed by the European diplomatic mission in abusive extension to their rights under the capitulations (18th century). Originally intended for local recruited consular officers and agents, they were sold or granted to growing numbers of foreign and local Christian and Jewish merchants to acquire a privileged and protected status.” In return for a fee of 1500 piastres, the *Berat* conferred the right to trade with Europe with the same rights as European traders: fewer custom duties and more tax exemptions, thus making these merchants richer than their Muslim colleagues<sup>53</sup>. These grants enforced the Ottoman *Dhimmi* to compete on more or less equal terms with foreign merchants, creating a new richer and privileged class. The same privileges were not extended to Muslim merchants

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*Middle Eastern Studies*, 38, 3, (2002), pp. 145-170; S. E. William, “Sayyid Qutb's doctrine on Jahiliyya”, *IJMES*, 35, 4, (2003), pp. 521-545; Abul a 'la al-Maududi, *Jihad in Islam* (Beirut: The Holy Quran Publishing, 1980); *Towards the Understanding of the Qur'an*, tr. and ed. by Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1988), 3 vols.

<sup>53</sup> G. L. James, *The Modern Middle East. A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), tr. in Italian, *Storia del Medio Oriente Moderno* (Torino: Einaudi, 2009), p. 126.



until the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; however, those, who without external support, could afford to buy a similar right were limited, in opposition to a huge number of Ottoman Christian and Jewish subjects who received the consular privileges. It is clear to imagine how the Berat crashed into the internal trade relationship between the Muslim majority and the other religious minorities in the Middle East.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time as this socio-economic dynamic, Istanbul's decision to reform the traditional social-cultural and religious balances of power favoured the development of new understandings of the relationship between religious affiliation and ethno-political identity. Whereas before the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Ottoman administrative system allowed the universality of religious faith to prevail over ethnic and linguistic differences, although without destroying them, the “*reactualisation*” of the traditional “millet” system according to the institution of the religious community<sup>55</sup> opened the door to devastating conflicts. On one hand, the Great Powers intervened in Ottoman internal affairs, imposing their role (through renewed capitulations and *Berat*) as the protectors of non-Muslim religious minorities and supporting the evolution of new and stronger separatist movements (concerning the Armenians). On the other hand, reforming the millet system,<sup>56</sup> the formal abolition of civil disparities among Ottoman subjects, re-defined the Empire's relationship with its non-Muslim population, without allowing Istanbul to re-impose its authority over the provinces and its subjects. A Western racial “Supremacism” ideology, like European Colonialism policies, shaped the basis for the development of an “*Islamic Supremacism*” which emerged as the expression of “Political-ideological” elaboration in Neo-Wahhabism, Turkish Kem-

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54 M. Demichelis, “Citizenship and Equity. An Excursus within the Nahda, Islamic Pluralism and Religious Exclusivism”, in B. Airò, M. Zaccaria, *I Confini della Cittadinanza nel Nuovo Medio Oriente*, (Roma: Viella Ed., 2015), p. 23.

55 K. H. Karpat, “Millets and Nationality: the Roots of Incongruity of Nation and State in the Post-Ottoman Era”, *Christian and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: the Functioning of a Plural Society*, B. Braude, B. Lewis (eds.) (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1982), vol. I, pp. 147-148; P. Kitromilides, *An Orthodox Commonwealth: Symbolic Legacies and Cultural Encounters in Southeastern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2007), pp. IX-X.

56 Since Mehmet II, the traditional millet system made it possible to take into account and rule over the various religious-ethnic groups that composed the Empire. K. H. Karpat, *Millets and Nationality*, p. 143.

alism and post-Kemalist ideology,<sup>57</sup> as in the thought of authors as Rashid Rida (d. 1935) and Shakib Arslan (d. 1946). In this case as well, the track is “*au rebours*”, Western colonialist ideology of the “state-nationalism” has brought about the peculiarity of a new form of *Supremacism*, an Islamic-religious-nationalist one,<sup>58</sup> which in the last century has widely restricted the presence of religious minorities in the Islamic majority regions, while, in Europe as in North America, it is “populist” politicians and media that have performed a dangerous role-playing game in our democracies and our democratic beliefs.

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57 U. Cizre, *The Turkish Ak party and its leaders. Criticism, Opposition and Dissent* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 57; U. Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion and Nation State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 13ff.

58 M. Demichelis, P. Maggiolini, *The Struggle to Define a Nation. Rethinking Religious Nationalism in Contemporary Islamic World*, pp. 1-15.

*Divide et impera:*  
**The political application of sectarianism in the Egyptian context.**  
**From the Sadat years to the reign of Mubarak (1970-2011)**  
*Alessia Melcangi*

## **1. Introduction**

Looking from the Sadat presidency until now it is possible to notice that the top-down sectarianism in Egyptian politics has represented a strategy used by the different political leaders to hold on to power through a strong manipulation and exacerbation of divisions in society.

Religious or communal pluralism does not definitely lead to political sectarianism but its development is strictly linked with the elites' political behaviour and interests: as Yusri Hazran states “sectarianism takes the form of the instrumental exploitation of a religious or communal identity or framework in order to enable political organization, the gaining of political legitimacy, the promotion of political change, or the preservation of the control held by interest groups”.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the nature of the executive-centered Egyptian political system based on a strong and autocratic presidential leadership, typical of both military regimes and single-party dominant system, led the recent regimes to manage sectarianism as a tool for maintaining their power.<sup>2</sup> The strategy was that of containment, repression and external diversion realized through the use of co-optation of key figures and social groups, the balance of key power centers against one another and the turning of public attention away from unresolved problems.

The sectarian tensions, which characterised the Sadat (1970-1981) and Mubarak (1981-2011) regimes, were the product of a divisive rhetoric widespread within the framework of continuous reproductions of their authoritarian survival and of their quest for power. The

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1 Y. Hazran, “The origins of sectarianism in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, (2017), p. 2.

2 C. R. Ryan, “Political Strategies and Regime Survival in Egypt”, *Journal of Third World Studies*, 18/2 (2001), p. 3.

result was an increasing amount of violence which hit all the Egyptian minorities, in particular the Christian Copts.

After the colonial period, the establishment of the nation-state in North African societies as the dominant political form put into play a new rationale of governance that divided the governed in order to maintain and enhance their legitimacy: instead of recognizing parallel communities distinct by their confessional, tribal or ethnic affiliation, the nation-state sought to represent the image of a unique group of people united by a shared history, culture and territory, trying to eradicate, eliminate or assimilate the “others”.<sup>3</sup> The way in which the elites started to deal with difference and diversity was based on the exploitation and politicization of divisions among society, often based on economical disparities, manipulated by various groups to gain legitimization.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the (ab)use of religion to justify rule and seek legitimacy and non-functional representation of minorities in the government became a component of this top-down sectarianism as a strategy to keep consensus. If on the one hand the official regimes' discourse evoked the modern Western culture, the mechanism of control and the normative system used in order to control the masses rest on utilitarian interpretation of values belonging to from the religious traditional world<sup>5</sup>: the appeal to nationalism or national unity, in a formal level, let the elites curb the sub-national affiliations, in particular religious, in the service of political interests.

Sectarianism has deep political roots which overlapped the ideological one increasingly, causing, however, violence and hostility.

It goes around “the sources of political and economic power of the territorial state, the religious divergence being exploited by the ruling elite, the majority vs. minority divide forming a decisive factor in the relations between the two communities within the political framework”.<sup>6</sup>

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3 F. Elhousseini, “The Arab World between the Dilemma of Nationalism and Sectarian Conflicts”, *Hemispheres*, 30/2, (2015), p. 42.

4 Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), *Two Years of Sectarian Violence: What happened? Where Do We Begin?* (2011), pp. 20-22.

5 Y. Hazran, “The origins of sectarianism in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent”, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

This is a matter of state-society relations and state-minority communities relationships: as in the case of the Coptic community in Egypt, a country with a fragile and polarizing political system, an economic sector in deep crises but not a structural sectarianism<sup>7</sup>.

While attacks by Muslims on Copts have a sectarian element, confessional differences are not the primary sources of tension.

Egypt's outdated laws and authoritarian institutions have made Copts a target for social conflict.

Considering the last decades, this paper will analyse the dynamics of sectarian violence in contemporary Egypt from the seventies until the 2011 revolution, taking the specific case of the Egyptian Christian Copts as a case study. The research will concentrate on the relationship between the State and minority communities and in particular on the close and often controversial alliance between the Coptic Church and the regime. Moreover, this article will try to show how the Egyptian style top-down sectarianism would eventually backfire, contrary to the expectations of using it as a strategy of authoritarian survival.

In the last years, religious fervour has invaded all groups and associations in Egypt, inflaming communal feelings while weakening national bonds and the idea of a “national unity”. Turning against the remnants of Nasser's socialist entourage, Sadat embraced Islam and Islamists as a counterweight to the left and opened the door to economic liberalization. Setting religion at the centre of the public and political environment also isolated Copts. The seventies were marked by the rise of violent social clashes between Muslims and Christians, as well.

The recurrence of religious strife continued for all the Mubarak presidency: although he tried to cement the President's image as a protector of Muslims and non-Muslims with the “national unity” campaign of the early nineties, it was still difficult for Copts to see their claims fulfilled. But the strong collaboration created between the President and the Pope solidified the Coptic support for the official rhetoric of “national dialogue” and “national unity”, the regime tried apparently to break down barriers but it actually created a mechanism to

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7 B. Aras, S. Bardakçı, “Egypt's Top-Down Sectarianism”, *Pomeas Policy Brief*, 1 (2014), p. 1.

avoid a nuanced discussion of the challenges concerning relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. The Sadat years and the return of the *fitna ta'ifiyya*

The collapse of the Nasserist ideology led to the dissolution of nationalistic and socialistic projects, letting in room for radical tendencies, keen on defining themselves only from a religious viewpoint.

Anwar al-Sadat, the President of Egypt from 1970, using Islam as a tool for a political legitimation, opened the door to Islamic movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, for political participation; this new policy pushed Islam once more to the fore as the common denominator of the majority, thus leaving the Copts out of the political arena. During the seventies, the religious tension between Muslims and Copts –which represented, according to a census conducted in 1976, 2.3 million (6.7%) in a population of 38,5 million<sup>9</sup>– intensified following a series of clashes. At the beginning of the seventies more than eleven confessional incidents occurred, the majority of which originated in disputes over Church constructions or renovations.

In this period the Church emerged as the Coptic community's effective political representative and eclipsed the secular elite in consequence of the election of Bishop Shenuda as Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church in October 1971. The political leadership of Pope Shenuda III coincided with a growing sense of Coptic nationalism or ethnic consciousness; Sadat's appeal to religion and support of Islamic organizations alienated the traditionally quiescent community and provoked several conflicts between the President and the Pope and violent social clashes between the religious groups. In fact, the election of Shenuda marked the end of the collaboration with the State started

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8 A. El-Shobaki, *Ending sectarianism in Egypt*, "Egypt Independent", 14 January 2011. Available at: <http://www.egyptindependent.com/ending-sectarianism-egypt/>

9 Every analysis and research on the Coptic community in Egypt needs some thought about the numerical size of the Copts in contemporary Egypt. This represents a complex problem seen from a historical perspective: it is difficult to obtain reliable data from government statistics and from those of the community. The government's will to reduce the relevance of the Coptic community and the fear of the Christians to declare their faith in public has made the official census inaccurate. For further details see A. Melcangi, *I copti nell'Egitto di Nasser. Tra politica e religione (1952-1970)* (Roma: Carocci, 2017).

with Nasser and the previous Pope, Cyril VI.<sup>10</sup> The Patriarch refused to pledge his loyalty to the regime; as Sadat revived Islam as a political idiom in Egypt, he insisted upon the preservation of Copts' rights.

Within the community, Shenuda consolidated his consensus thanks to the network of social services created on his initiative in order to help the worshippers, in particular the middle-class, to survive in the midst of a rapid contraction of economic opportunities and social mobility.<sup>11</sup> The availability of such services has meant that the public space has become increasingly confessional.

Moreover, the Church denied Coptic laymen a role in both communal and national affairs, and thus drove a wedge between clergy and laity favouring the process initiated with Nasser which had led the political activism of the Coptic elite in the early years of twentieth century to be replaced by the rise of the political role of the Church. As a consequence of this, “the voice of Shenuda was considered by Church and State as the only legitimate voice of the Coptic community in political affairs”.<sup>12</sup>

Shenuda had the ability to take charge of the Coptic requests defending them in political terms: the rights of equity, of juridical autonomy and security, of an appropriate political and administrative representation and the rights of the free building of places of worship and the respect of different beliefs represented the main concerns of the community. The Church's political behaviour represented a reassertion of religious identity which provided the Copts with a mechanism to resist State action.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding the political sphere, Sadat's rise to power was accompanied by an ever-growing trend towards Coptic withdrawal from Egyptian public life that culminated in their virtually complete ab-

10 For further details see: A. Melcangi, *I copti nell'Egitto di Nasser. Tra politica e religione* (1952-1970), cit.

11 S. S. Hasan, *Christian versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Coptic Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 111-112.

12 P. Sedra, “Copts and the Millet Partnership: The Intra-Communal Dynamics behind Egyptian Sectarianism”, *Journal of Law and Religion*, 29/ 3 (2014), p. 497.

13 P. Van Doorn-Harder, “Copts: Fully Egyptian but for a Tattoo?”, in M. Shatzmiller (ed.), *Nationalism and Minority Identities in Islamic Societies* (Québec: McGill-Queen's University Press-MQUP, 2005), p. 76.

sence. Although his governments included two or three Christian cabinet ministers, it seemed clear that there was a political discrimination against Copts: "In 1971 three out of 360 deputies were Copts, while in the parliamentary election of 1976 not one Copt was elected; in 1979 only four Copts were elected in addition to the usual quota of eight or ten Christian deputies usually appointed by the President".<sup>14</sup> The Copts were also under-represented in the higher grades of the civil service and some sensitive government departments appeared to be totally closed to them on the grounds that they could be a risk to security. The government was afraid to provoke a Muslim reaction against the appointment of a Christian.

In 1977 relationships between Church and State entered a very difficult phase. Coptic anxieties began to reflect the increasing strength of the *gama'at islamiyya*,<sup>15</sup> and the Copts felt that Sadat had given his regime an Islamic stamp.<sup>16</sup> Gradually the new policy abandoned the nationalist ideology that was inclusive towards Copts as Arabs and Egyptians. This sectarian distinction contributed to an ideological fragmentation in the national apparatus injecting hatred and repulsion from both sides leading to a serious sectarian clash in the village of Khanka<sup>17</sup> in Qalyubiyya Governorate in 1972. Christians

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14 A. Melcangi, "The Political Participation of Copts in Egypt: From the Nasser Years to the Sectarian Strife of the Nineties", in M. Fois, A. Pes (eds.), *Politics and Minorities in Africa* (Roma: Aracne, 2013), p. 231.

15 These Islamic groups started as very popular student organization in a modern Egyptian university. The group that afterwards took the name of the *gama'at islamiyya* was focusing at the time on installing moral and social ethics in the university based on a series of rules that they consider "Islamic". It was only later that the groups started to advocate direct and violent confrontation against the regime, expanding its political activities outside the university and projected the plan to kill Sadat with the collaboration of the Jihad group. For further details see G. Kepel, *Le Prophète et Pharaon. Les mouvements islamistes dans l'Égypte contemporaine* (Paris: La Découverte, 1984); J. Benin, J. Stork (eds.), *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); H. N. Ansari, "The Islamic Militants in Egyptia Politics", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 16/ 1, (1984).

16 J. D. Pennington, "The Copts in modern Egypt", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 18/2 (1982), p. 171.

17 By November 1972, in an atmosphere charged with sectarianism, an unauthorized Church in the Delta village of Khanka was set ablaze, and Shenuda sent a hundred priests and four hundred laymen to pray at the site of the arson. The



have become more endangered in being viewed as scapegoats for Islamists who are angry against the president.

The increasing polarization of society showed how necessary it was to restore the reference to the land of belonging, Egypt, as the main identity that was allowed to be recognized and which was more important than the religious one. Sadat called for a conference to discuss national unity on 24 July 1972 and the next month the National Assembly, during an emergency meeting, passed the law of national unity which permitted freedom of belief and the respect of freedoms. In spite of this, the condition of the Copts quickly developed to a true status of discrimination which led the Church to call for a Christian religious conference which took place on 17 January 1977. The statement issued highlighted the urgency for government protection of Christians' culture and their property and stated the inalienability of some rights such as freedom of belief and worship, the abandonment of efforts to apply the Islamic law to non-Muslims, as well as the cancellation of the restriction to build Churches and greater Coptic representation in labour unions, professional associations, local and regional councils, and the parliament.<sup>18</sup>

During the years 1978-1979 the conflicts between the two religious groups continued to increase in the Sa' id (Upper Egypt),<sup>19</sup> especially in Minya and Asyut where the presence of the Coptic community was higher than the national average.

The claims of the community to rediscover the Coptic identity clashed with the dominant idea of the *gama'at islamiyya* shared by many Muslims. The protest is therefore interpreted as a desire to subvert the status of submission to which the Copts are condemned: as Gilles Kepel states, "giving up their status as *dhimmi*, which represents the one and the only admissible method to accept their existence, albeit subordinate to the Muslim majority, the Christians defy Islam. It

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incident exacerbated the relationship between the Patriarch and Sadat. See G. Kepel, *Le Prophète et Pharaon. Les mouvements islamistes dans l'Égypte contemporaine*, p. 198.

18 S. E. Ibrahim et al., "The Copts of Egypt", *Minority Rights Group International Report* (London: 1996), p. 18.

19 For a list of the various incidents occurred from the seventies to the mid-eighties, see N. R. Farah, *Religious strife in Egypt: crisis and ideological conflict in the Seventies* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1986); H. Ansari, "Sectarian conflict in Egypt and the Political Expediency of Religion", *Middle East Journal*, 38/3, 1984.

becomes a duty of good Muslims to oppose their destructive actions".<sup>20</sup> This situation was further aggravated by the ongoing clash between Patriarch Shenuda and President Sadat.

"To engineer the shift, the ruling elites resorted to certain policies that triggered a process of significant changes in Muslim-Coptic relations".<sup>21</sup> This fact was highlighted when the phrase "Islam is the religion of the State, and *Shari'a* is a main source of legislation"<sup>22</sup> was added to the second article of the constitution in 1971, which was later amended to "*Shari'a* is the"<sup>23</sup> main source of legislation"<sup>24</sup> in 1980.

In the light of the numerous atrocities perpetrated by Islamic militants, the evident lack of zeal with which the government investigated them and the failure to bring those responsible wrongdoers to trial had by then made the Copts feel insecure and in danger inside their nation.

Between the spring of 1980 and the autumn of 1981, the *gama'at islamiyya* did not hesitate to fan the flames of sectarian tensions to put the State into trouble. At the scene of the interfaith clash there were three protagonists: in addition to the two communities, Christian and Muslim, we could now find the State.

First the government coined the phrase that would become the slogan of the following regime: national unity, the existence of Egypt as a nation based on the harmonious co-existence of Copts and Muslims which must be defended by the *fitna ta'ifiyya*. Sadat, facing mounting opposition from all political groups, used religious strife as an excuse and responded with wide arrests in September 1981: in that difficult period, Shenuda was banished to a convent in Upper Egypt, and Muslim Brothers and Islamic group leaders were arrested and jailed.

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20 G. Kepel, *Le Prophète et Pharaon. Les mouvements islamistes dans l'Égypte contemporaine*, cit., p. 135; K. J. Beattie, *Egypt During the Sadat Years* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 271.

21 N. R. Farah, *Religious strife in Egypt: crisis and ideological conflict in the Seventies*, p. 122.

22 H. Dowidar, "Égypte", in E. Canal-Forgues (ed.), *Recueil des constitutions des pays arabes* (Bruxelles: Bruylant, 2000), p. 91.

23 Italics mine.

24 H. Dowidar, "Égypte", cit., p. 92.

According to D. al-Khawaga a parallel between the political action of the Copts and the new Islamic group, in the course of this decade, is more than evident: “Overall, despite the reticence that each group displayed towards the other, during the seventies they started to impose their political visibility, to bring into question the legitimacy of power, introducing their respective ethics into the Egyptian political language, mobilizing international allies to gain official recognition as political actors, and finally cut off all dialogue with the government which was considered illegitimate”.<sup>25</sup> This “Autumn of Fury” climaxed when Islamist militants shot and killed the President at a military parade commemorating the 1973 Arab- Israeli War. The end of the Sadat regime did not lead to a return of interfaith collaboration.

On the contrary, the religious strife continued throughout the Mubarak regime.

### **3. Between denial and repression: the politicization of sectarianism and the Coptic question under Mubarak**

According to the Egyptian official statistics, despite the escalation of violence and religious attacks of the seventies and the increase of Copts who decided to leave Egypt as a consequence of them, in 1996 the number of Christians reached 3,5 million, 5.7% out of the population of 62,5 million,<sup>26</sup> raising the number by 5.3% in 2011 with a population 80 million.<sup>27</sup>

It was in that years that the presidency of Mubarak -who arose to power after the assassination of Sadat in 1981— realized what can be called “the politicization of sectarian tension”. Recurrence of religious strife marked the whole Mubarak regime (1981-2011): although he immediately began to keep the Islamic groups at a distance and

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<sup>25</sup> D. al-Khawaga, *La renouveau copte. La communauté comme acteur politique*, Thèse de doctorat sous la direction de R. Leveau (Paris: Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris, 1993), p. 424.

<sup>26</sup> H. Bayoumi, F. Moriconi-Ebrard, *Century Census Egypt 1882-1996/Un Siècle de Recensement* (Le Caire: Cedej-Capmas, 2003), p. 126; See also Y. Courbage, Ph. Fargues, *Chrétiens et Juifs dans l'Islam arabe et turc* (Paris: Fayard, 1992), pp. 318-319; É. Denis, “Cent ans de localisation de la population chrétienne égyptienne”, *Astrolabe*, 2 (2000), pp. 131-134.

<sup>27</sup> Pew Research Center, *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Global Christianity. A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population* (2011), p. 65.

tried to cement the President's image as a protector of Muslims and Christians with the “national unity” campaign of the early nineties, the claims of the Christians went unheeded. In this case the ruling elite did not hesitate to exploit political sectarianism to weaken their enemies or mobilize political support: “the integration and the control of the Islamists considered politically moderated and the support for the official Islam and elimination of the radical groups”<sup>28</sup> delineated the principle characteristics of the new regime.

A perpetual guarantee remained in the form of shared Egyptian identity and the social intermingling of Copts and Muslims in a single social context, a “unique fabric”. Nevertheless official rhetoric of “national dialogue” and “national unity”, trying apparently to break down barriers, did not consider the differences and the real problems of the Christian group.<sup>29</sup>

Manipulating sectarianism, the government started the ideological construction of the “outsider” or “other” with the purpose of denying a local cause for communal violence and blaming foreign forces, as a result of the rejection of the sectarianism itself. “Through constructing an ‘extreme other’, this discourse also established a ‘moderate us’. The former is represented as an aberration from the norm while authentic Egyptian values are represented as displayed by the latter. This established differences and distance between the ‘us’ of the authentic Egyptians and the ‘them’ of the outsiders or traitors to national unity”,<sup>30</sup> which became the victim –there was a clear necessity to avoid the representation of the victims as Copts or Muslims.

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28 L. Guirguis, *Les coptes d'Égypte. Violences communautaires et transformations politiques (2005-2012)* (Paris: Karthala, 2012), p. 39.

29 A. El-Shobaki, *Ending sectarianism in Egypt*: “In fact, although the government of Mubarak issued several laws in favour of the Copts such as the ‘relative’ flexibility in the legal procedure for building Churches, the establishment of Christmas as an official state holiday, the leadership's intervention to sponsor the development and revival of study centres and revival of cultural artefacts, especially on the occasion of millennium celebrations, some groups within the community emphasized that the government's attempts to fight the fundamentalist current led to its sidelining of Coptic issues and concerns.”

30 E. Iskander, “The ‘mediation’ of Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt: The strategies and discourses of the official Egyptian press during Mubarak's presidency”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23/1, (2012), p. 39.

But while the discourse blaming communal violence on foreign agents remained in evidence, it was overcome by the construction of a more specific “them” set up to compare an idea of bad Egyptians against that of good Egyptians, loyal to the national unity and to the State that protects them.<sup>31</sup> The “extreme other” was ultimately identified in the Muslim Brotherhood and in the Copts of the diaspora which, living outside the homeland, became traitors to national unity.

“National unity is not a new concept, but it started to have an increased political significance”:<sup>32</sup> now it was used in order to consolidate the government rhetoric and bring together the different groups in support of the regime which set itself up as the only defender of the national unity.

Mubarak's regime stood under severe Islamist pressure and compromised with the Islamic “moderates” in order to isolate and crush the violent extremists. This meant continuing the discriminatory trends of the *status quo*. Whenever Copts were being attacked the government remained passive and refrained from intervention or action. Its decision to avoid confrontation with the Islamists was particularly acute when, during the early nineties, the *gama'at islamiyya* had become very powerful and had stepped up its violent activities, which included targeting the Copts. Radical Islamists were more widespread through the rural immigrants of Sa‘id: the Cairo suburbs of Ayn Shams and Imbaba witnessed outbreaks of violent clashes from 1990-1992, typically instigated by routine disputes between Muslim and Christian neighbours that escalated into large-scale riots with numerous injuries and casualties on both sides.

The wave of radical Islamist terrorist attacks targeting tourists and foreign businesses beginning in mid-1992 was in particular a threat to Coptic security. In 1992 alone, thirty-seven anti-Coptic attacks were reported, although national attention was more focused on

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31 S. Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 202.

32 E. Iskander, “The ‘mediation’ of Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt: The strategies and discourses of the official Egyptian press during Mubarak's presidency”, 41.

the threat that Islamist radicals posed to State security rather than addressing the Coptic issue in particular.<sup>33</sup>

'Ala al-Aswani, one of the most important critical voices against the Mubarak regime, affirmed that

the inconsistency of the State policy in the sectarian domain is due to the regime being afraid of external pressure, its over-reliance on the repressive State apparatus, and the general prosecutor's office being under the influence of the justice minister who is appointed and directed by Mubarak.<sup>34</sup>

All of these issues have led to the vacillation of the State policy regarding Copts. Many state officials, security officers and legislators denied the existence of sectarian violence in Egypt or minimized the extent of the problem. The army and police have been negligent in their duty to intervene against this violence, which has further enabled the spread of sectarian violence.<sup>35</sup> The most dangerous way to deal with the issue of interreligious clashes was based on the conviction that it was a security problem that required the application of the ongoing state of emergency (he conducted his entire presidency under emergency law No. 162 of 1958) which legitimized all types of intervention of the State. So the way of treating sectarianism as a local issue led to the "informal reconciliation" according to which the two parts were invited to find a public agreement at the presence of the religious representatives and the local notables. Moreover, the government deferred to the military tribunals the Islamist militants, whose crimes often often included attacks against the Copts, avoiding any equal application of the penal code as in the case of a criminal act.

The repression and the secrets did not imply any type of official recognition of the violence suffered by Christians. As always, the government position moved toward two main characteristics: denial and

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33 A. Ayalon, "Egypt's Coptic Pandora's Box", O. Bengio, G. Ben-Dor (eds.), *Minorities and the State in the Arab World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), p. 62.

34 A. Al-Aswani, *On the State of Egypt. What Caused the Revolution*, trans. J. Wright (London: Canongate, 2011), pp. 131-132.

35 M. Tadros, *Copts at the Crossroads. The Challenges of Building Inclusive Democracy in Contemporary Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press 2013), p. 87.

repression. “The denial, expressed in an insensitive way, became rejection of the existence of tensions, disputes or hate speeches between the ‘two elements of the nation’ and the denunciation of the ‘foreign hand’ which sowed trouble at the heart of the peaceful Egyptian nation”.<sup>36</sup>

The worsening of the economy, infrastructure and security climate of Egypt<sup>37</sup> dragged Copts down along with all other Egyptians who suffered for a civil society which was marked by permanent government interference and repression.

Under Sadat and his successor, state security agents have been active participants in the violence rather than inept bystanders, a practice that with difficulty has changed during the decades, as the facts of Kosheh<sup>38</sup> in 2000 confirmed. Or in other cases the regime fails to protect Copts, as in the bombing of the Alexandria Church the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2011.<sup>39</sup> This collaboration —between the State's formal coercive apparatus and its unofficial proxies— has thrived under the aegis of rhetorically concerned yet politically detached leaders.

The episodes of violence did not cease after 1997, the beginning of a fleeting period of pacification, of which the attacks committed in 2004 against a tourist complex in Taba (Sinai) signed the end. The proliferation of Islamist discourses, combined with the concomitant formation of a Coptic imaginary and environment centered around community values, had finally broken the bonds existing between

36 L. Guirguis, *Les coptes d'Égypte. Violences communautaires et transformations politiques (2005-2012)*, p. 43.

37 J. Brownlee, “Violence Against Copts in Egypt”, *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2013).

38 On January 1-2, 2000, Muslims from nearby towns and villages flocked to Kosheh, a village in Upper Egypt with a population of 35,000 at that time, the majority of them Copts, in response to a dispute between two merchants, one Copt, the other Muslim, the evening of December 31. The assailants vandalized Coptic stores and homes and attacked the locals. The Ministry Twenty of Interior intervened after that twenty Copts were killed. See S. E. Ibrahim, “The Road of Thorns From Al-Khanka 1972 to Al-Kosheh 2000,” *Watani*, 13 February 2000, trans. *Arab West Report Press Summaries and Media Research for Dialogue*. Available at: <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2000/week-7/21-road-thorns-al-khanka-1972-al-kosheh-2000>.

39 During the New Year's Eve service, a massive explosion at the Coptic Church of Saint Mark and Pope Peter in Alexandria killed 23 people and injured more than 70.

worshippers of both religions. In this climate of social congestion and segregation, the latent tensions and old resentments fed on different strife, and the disputes between Christians and Muslims frequently resulted in attacks and reprisals. In 2008, a report of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) stated that the violence became more destructive and deadly than before, extended to areas that had previously been exempt, and were less frequently involved in the dynamics of local conflicts. In addition, the report revealed that seemingly spontaneous actions often turned out to be organized and premeditated.<sup>40</sup>

A close examination of the conditions of the Copts under Mubarak reveals a slight opening on the part of the State. However, although Mubarak's administration was more willing to bring the Copts into the fold, their political participation remained limited to a number of appointed MPs and ministers with second-rate portfolios.

Coptic representation in the last cabinet before the recent Egyptian Revolution consisted of two ministers; regarding the number of Coptic members appointed by the President in the People's Assembly sessions, since 1964, it has, with one exception, exceeded the number of Coptic members elected by the people (the exception was in 1987 when six Copts were elected to the Assembly). However, the system of proportional representation instituted in 1983 in place at the time, was scrapped by the government shortly thereafter.<sup>41</sup>

The only way for the community to survive during the eighties and the nineties was to abandon the method of protest as a political action, trying to find a common grounds for reconciliation with the leadership.<sup>42</sup> So the Coptic community started to reshape the self-image in which the Church took an important lead, resulting in continuing the reformation of the communal identity towards a religious identity and in the social restructuring of a traditional community which had already begun in the last years of the Sadat government.

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40 Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), *Two Years of Sectarian Violence: What happened? Where Do We Begin?*, p. 8.

41 A. Melcangi, "The Political Participation of Copts in Egypt: From the Nasser Years to the Sectarian Strife of the Nineties", p. 235.

42 D. al-Khawaga, *La renouveau copte. La communauté comme acteur politique*, p. 426.



The Church, stifling the divergent opinions inside the community, imposed itself as the only voice which had the right to define what it means to be Coptic, underlining the differences and the similarities compared with the other community and defining their way to be Egyptian: “as a result, there are effectively no challenges to the authority of the Church in the spiritual realm”<sup>43</sup> which directly led the Church to play a more active and defensive role but, above all, to exercise a high-powered such a mission to minister to all Egyptian Christians, inside and outside the community. The strategical way of surviving in the difficult decades of the Mubarak regime was for the Coptic Church to support the President's policies unconditionally and state both the sameness of Christians and Muslims, waving the flag of Egyptianess and equal citizenship within an Egyptian national state, and the differences, underlining the uniqueness and originality of Coptic culture and its Christian identity.

The relationship between the Pope and Mubarak was based on a sort of “tactical agreement”:<sup>44</sup> the former “started to adopt a low profile, to cooperate with the regime, to avoid confrontation and embrace the rhetoric of national unity publicly supporting Mubarak and consolidate his power within the Church”.<sup>45</sup> The President needed the support of the Copts more than ever in order to base its anti-terrorism policy and create a magnificent image of interreligious harmony, allowing Coptic independence in community affairs and recognizing Shenuda as the voice of the Church in political matters.<sup>46</sup>

This entente fostered the kind of minoritarian discourse that the Coptic revival process had created. By recognizing the Patriarch as the official representative and voice of the Coptic community, the state endorsed this emerging ethno-religious identity, by which Copts are

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43 P. S. Rowe, “The Sheep and the Goats? Christian Groups in Lebanon and Egypt in Comparative Perspective”, in M. Shatzmiller (ed.), *Nationalism and Minority Identities in Islamic Societies*, p. 90.

44 N. A. Al-Fattah (ed.), *La situation religieuse en Égypte* (Cairo: Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, 1995), p. 90.

45 P. Sedra, “Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim relations*, 10/2, (1999), p. 227. In the presidential election of 2005 Shenuda supported the candidacy of Mubarak suggesting to the community to do the same.

46 N. van Doorn-Harder, “Betwixt and Between. The Copts of Egypt”, *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 23/1 (2013), p. 13.

characterized by religion rather than by citizenship.<sup>47</sup> On the other side the Church supported the celebration of saints and martyrs' life narratives. They were used not only to build Christian identity but also to negotiate the minority status. Obviously, the stories about the saints and martyrs show the importance of the asceticism and sacrifice. Suffering becomes an aspect of the life of Egyptian Copts, the only possible destiny which relegates the Christians to this marginal and passive minority status.

It was in the Church's interest to limit the expression of Copts as individuals, rejecting the idea of founding a Coptic political party; so the community started to reflect the image of an "exemplary minority",<sup>48</sup> as Dina al-Khawaga states. This behaviour provoked the severe reaction of the Coptic elite, made up almost entirely of eminent intellectuals, and young Copts who had repeatedly asked the Patriarch to operate according to his role, accusing him of penalizing their culture and practice of full Egyptian citizenship.<sup>49</sup>

The presidential and parliamentary elections highlighted how the government had been trying to exploit the Coptic votes by making all kinds of promises to the Church and the people, but not offering anything in return after victory. The only chance for average Copts to improve their lives would have been to take a high-profile position in the government-backed National Democratic Party (NDP). The official regime limits Coptic citizens to a symbolic participation in the political system which is most evident by the President's appointment of Coptic representatives in the People's Assembly strengthening the position of the Church as the main representative of the community *vis-à-vis* the State.<sup>50</sup>

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47 M. Tadros, "Vicissitudes in the entente between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952-2007)", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41/2 (2009), p. 276.

48 D. al-Khawaga, *La renouveau copte. La communauté comme acteur politique*, cit., p. 427.

49 B. Nikolov, *Care of poor and ecclesiastical government: an ethnography of the social service of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo* (Baltimore-Maryland: ProQuest UMI Dissertation Publishing, 2008), pp. 17-18.

50 K. Kamal, *The NDP's manipulation of Egyptian Copts*, "Egypt Independent", 19 November 2010.

Furthermore, they were under represented in a number of fields: during the Mubarak regime there were hardly any high-ranking Copts in the military, police force, judiciary or diplomatic corps.

Copts were also drastically under represented in higher university posts. They tended to be excluded from the intelligence service and the presidential staff and were under represented among Egypt's regional governors. Important state offices were still closed to Egyptian citizens with a Coptic background, and their representation in the judiciary, the official media, diplomatic missions, the army and the police did not exceed 2% of the total.<sup>51</sup>

Only at the end of the 2000s an initial movement of protest started to make its voice heard: by 2009 different new organizations calling for workers' rights, full judicial independence, and political reform challenged the regime. One of them was the Egyptian Movement for Change, and also known by its slogan *Kifaya* (Enough).

This group, born in 2004, led some Copts who opposed Mubarak's policies to act politically and challenge the President's partnership with Shenuda. It was the rising of a new activism among the youth within the community: this group put a distance between themselves and the Church's support for the regime and started to get involved in politics on their own. Some young Copts, rather than appealing to the respect of human rights, "concluded that Christians would only get equal rights within a democratic regime based on the principle of citizenship for all Egyptians".<sup>52</sup> These movements from below represented the beginning of a protest march which was able to break the chains of the national ideal, now too narrow and unbearable, questioning the power of Mubarak, his solid alliance with the Church and bringing out all the contradictions of the Egyptian system that would lead to the revolt of January 25, 2011.

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51 A. Gunidy, "Symbolic victim in a socially regressing Egypt: the declining situation of the Copts", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 14/1, (2010), p. 85.

52 G. Fahmi, "The Coptic Church and Politics in Egypt", *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (2014). Available at: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/12/18/coptic-church-and-politics-in-egypt-pub-57563>

#### 4. Conclusion

The nation-state model, as the dominant form adopted after the colonial period in North Africa societies, in many cases led to an obsessive and instrumental focus on the role of the centralized political and administrative powers and gave rise to a new ideal of governance that divided the traditional communities, generating an internal contradiction. One of the attempts carried out by the new governments to deal with ethnic and religious identity claims, through which communities started to demand forms of official recognition and accommodation, was to manage and politicize the sectarianism.

But in doing so, the regimes, risen from the ashes of the colonial power, did not take into account those “identity politics” or “politics of recognition”. In most cases, the state-building process has proved instrumental, incomplete and unable to recompose its pluralistic societies, politicizing identities and fostering fragmentation and polarization. On the other side the communities, affected by this process, implemented different models of accommodation, redefinition or reinvention of their identities becoming powerful enough to challenge the identity that the hegemonic national state tried to establish historically, politically and culturally.

In the case of Egypt, as we have seen, the state model influenced, used and manipulated the sub-state identities in order to secure the political survival of political elites on the national context. Although sectarianism was denied and repudiated, informally the Egyptian regimes engaged in a systematic attempt to politicize differences or commonality as a tool of controlling masses and maintaining in power.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, religion has served to fragment a society split between rulers and ruled and its intersection with authoritarian control led to the emerge of numerous sectarian strife in the past forty years.

But the continuous top-down sectarianism failed as a strategy of authoritarian survival: as the Mubarak era demonstrated, state repression of Islamists does not necessarily protect Copts. On the contrary, the absence of an effective legal framework has become an acute problem that would have maintained hardly the *status quo*.

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53 K. Dalacoura, “The arab uprisings two years on: Ideology, sectarianism and the changing balance of power in the middle east”, *Insight Turkey*, 15/1, (2013), p. 80.

The ancient “*divide et impera*” approach has shown itself incapable of containing the contradictions within the system, contradictions that exploded violently at the beginning of the eighties and in 2011.



**State- and nation-building processes in the Middle East.  
What role for diversity in contemporary Iraq?  
*Paolo Maggiolini***

The process of establishing the institutional scope that ethno-linguistic, cultural or religious differences have in the state and society has historically represented one of the most important dynamics in both politics and culture, implicitly influencing the dialectical relationship between *self* and *other* as well as between *seeming* and *being*. This relational dynamic makes identities, solidarities and conflicts continuously develop and transform.<sup>1</sup> It also contributes to defining the paths, spheres and limits for associating and dividing as well as integrating or excluding people and communities dwelling within the same territory, polity and society.

Outside this dialectic and relation, diversity has never been politically important *per se* or in the abstract. It has never performed a role simply in terms of “quantity” and “demography”. Rather, diversity has become meaningful because of its strategic importance to determining the essence and content of socio-political fabrics. Therefore, dialectic and relation immediately project the political scope of diversity, situating its role in the *continuum* that divides the categories of *hostis* (enemy) from *inimicus* (rival). These attributes make its management, engagement or denial central for the production of precise hierarchies of power and domination, establishing the conditions for self-presenting and dialectically imagining socio-political identities, roles, presences and destinies. In contemporary politics, the imposition of the ideal of the nation, imagined as limited and sovereign, from which derives the principle of its rule over the state as an act of existence and fulfilment of a given people<sup>2</sup> has established the centrality of diversity for modern politics, making its management one of the fields where modern nation-states' authority, legitimacy and sovereignty have been established, tested or contested.

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1 A. N. Longva, A. S. Roald (eds.), *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-empowerment, Accommodation* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 5-8.

2 H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1979). S. Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A minority Report* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).

This holds particularly true in regard to the contemporary history of the Middle East, especially reconsidering the intense change and transformation occurring over the last century during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the modern nation-states. Looking back into the contemporary history of the region, one finds that today's Middle Eastern regional system and the foundations of the modern Arab states have been primarily framed on the reception, institutionalization or negation of the idea and role of “diversity” in politics.<sup>3</sup> This is not exceptional, but part of a wider history that pertains to the state- and nation-building process as a world phenomenon.

Nevertheless, in the contemporary Middle East particular historical and geopolitical conditions have contributed to make diversity a multifaceted political issue with an existential scope. In fact, since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the relationship between politics and diversity has taken the stage, influencing how “state” and “nation” have been conceived. Massacres, forced migrations, dislocations and population exchanges as well as the fragile institutionalization of the status of protected minorities during the Mandates and after the conquest of full independence in the post-colonial era have been the many means through which local elites and colonial powers have tried to overcome and accommodate Middle Eastern diversity, re-conceptualizing it with the aim of imposing the new modern-state principle. These strategies were employed in the urgency of founding modern states and societies equally able to include and reunite diversity under the imposition of unitary homogenous identities.

Looking at today's Middle Eastern politics, this historical dynamic shows itself to be still wandering over a very controversial path where diversity continues to be interpreted as a tool to rule and control from above or that can be easily manipulated to activate and mobilize contestation or conformism from below, inevitably politicizing and polarizing identities in new existential conflicts. Although Middle Eastern ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious diversity is often rhetorically praised as one of the positive resources that has enriched the region, making its cultures and societies flourish through the centur-

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3 G. Ben-Dor, “Minorities in the Middle East: Theory and Practice”, in *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, O. Bengio, G. Ben-Dor (eds.) (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).



ies, diversity in the region is more frequently perceived as an insurmountable obstacle for the stability and cohesiveness of local societies and political fields. Its management and accommodation is still one of the most difficult issues and challenges in regional politics.

Looking at today's regional instability and the imperilling of the non-Muslim population, one can easily be tempted to endorse either culturalist approaches or pseudo perennialist-historical perspectives in order to explain the ongoing Middle Eastern struggles.

In the first, the present state of conflict is thought to have sprung from an intrinsic cultural bias toward difference that negated to non-Arabs and non-Muslims the right to be recognized with real equal status. Accordingly, religious radicalism and intransigence is frequently proposed as the main explanatory paradigm that feeds Middle Eastern polarization and sectarianism. In the second, and with a number of different points of contact with the former approach, the ongoing regional struggles are interpreted as the final stage of a process leading the Middle Eastern regional system into its "political and historical maturity". Establishing a sort of parallel between the ongoing regional conflicts and the European wars of religion, this approach implicitly supports the idea that the survival of Middle Eastern diversity could only be achieved either through the fragmentation of present modern states into smaller territorial units more ethnically and religiously coherent or by the non-Muslims' emigration outside the region. Consequently, this position tends to consider Middle Eastern 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalism mimetic anomalies and tactical attempts to avoid an inevitable destiny that now has arrived at its inaudible consequences. At the end of the struggles, this would make the modernization principle become true also within the Middle East, re-establishing stability and peace as had already occurred in Europe many centuries ago.

The following pages will instead take an approach different from either perspective because considered inaccurate and too simplistic. In fact, they reiterate the perception that diversity is a political challenge *per se* that needs drastic solutions. Moreover, the religious radicalism paradigms and the pseudo perennialist-historical approaches do not capture the root causes and "mechanics" of the ongoing phenomena, limiting themselves to again proposing the idea that

the Middle East is intrinsically incapable of managing diversity without crumbling into conflicts and unrest, indirectly supporting the idea of the need for authoritarian regimes capable of imposing strict control and rule. In so doing, it is often ignored that the present turmoil and sectarianization are in part products of 20<sup>th</sup> century authoritarianism. Furthermore, aside from vague predictions that implicitly suggest that the final end of today's conflicts will come only from the exhaustion of the actors involved, they do not provide sufficient and convincing explanations of why the politicization of diversity became so intense precisely from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, recently re-emerging as one of the most significant patterns of present conflicts. The contemporary history of Middle Eastern states shows that at the heart of today's instability and turbulence lie multiple political, economic and institutional rather than religious and cultural issues, precisely related to how the modern nation-state idea has been translated and how authority, sovereignty, legitimacy and hegemony questions have been dealt with.

Therefore, the focal perspective through which to analyze the relationship between politics and diversity in the region should be that of the modern nation-state, as a cultural, historical and institutional phenomenon. The modern nation-state's vocation and claim to represent a given community, its identity, traditions and destiny has inevitably had a particular relationship with diversity, questioning its role and scope. The foundation of the modern nation-state has required re-imagining diversity in terms of a "majority" —the part naturally associated with the nation that rules over the state— and "minorities", the fragments only partially connected to the identity discourse embedded within the state and the "majority-nation".<sup>4</sup> The institutionalization, marginalization, attempted absorption or negation of diversity have thus become repercussions of a battle first and foremost pertaining to the nation's claim to rule the state, imposing its hegemony, authority and legitimacy. A struggle inevitably interpreted through the categories of the "authentic" and "original", where diversity has been frequently considered by nationalists as something fabricated or orchestrated against and from outside the limits of the state and the nation to divide and weaken them. Such a condition has not only been imposed

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4 S. Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, pp. 6-9.

from above. Sometimes it has also been indirectly determined by the hierarchies and communal representatives. Complying with or struggling against the state's central power, these actors have further contributed to politically emphasizing the distinctiveness and saliency of diversity, inevitably activating and mobilizing group identities and ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious specificities.<sup>5</sup> The result of this dynamic has undermined the significance of the concept of citizenship and of the ambition to include and reunite diversity within a united polity, subduing it to the will of the regimes in power and imprisoning individuals within the narrow boundaries of recognized and institutionalized minorities and majority. At the same time, it has dug a structural divide between multiple poles of authority and forms of legitimization, each competing to control the state or access to its resources.

The history of modern Iraq and its Christian presence is particularly significant in reconsidering such dynamics. Although demographically limited, the Christians of Iraq have been perceived as a tactical “resource” for the state's power as well as a “challenge”, even a threat in some periods, to its authority and existence. At the same time, they reacted differently towards the central state, both opposing and seeking to mediate with its homogenizing strategies.

This occurred after the foundation of the kingdom between 1920s-1930s and again during the Saddam Hussein era, becoming a sort of political scapegoat of intra-Muslim competition in the aftermath of the US' invasion in 2003.

First, the paper aims to reconsider the role of diversity in the contemporary Middle East through the lens of the state- and nation-building process. Secondly, it focuses on the Iraqi Christians' historical *vicissitudes* and their relationship with Iraqi state power, briefly focusing on the monarchical period and the Saddam era.

Finally, the analysis concentrates on the advent of the Organization of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (*Tanzim al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi 'Iraq wa al-Sham-Da'ish*) in 2014 and its fierce use of viol-

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5 L. Robson, *Minorities and the Modern Arab World: New Perspectives* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016), pp. 6-9; S. Zubaida, “The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 34, 2, (May 2002), pp. 206-207.

ence towards Iraqi minorities, especially the Yezidis and Christians. Without ignoring the differences between the former two experiences and the exceptional cruelty of *Da'ish* and thus avoiding proposing simplistic and improbable parallels, the analysis will show a subtle analogy in their ways of exploiting diversity for political purposes, assaulting, fragmenting and recomposing “diversity” according to a specific idea of the state and “nation” considered functional to their respective rules and forms of socio-political control. In this way, the paper will show how the antibodies for avoiding the exploitation of diversity do not lie just in the realm of security, or even in that of religion or today's de-radicalization paradigm, but in the way of politically and institutionally interpreting the role of the state and the content of citizenship both in the West today's Middle Eastern societies.

### **1. Ethno-linguistic and religious diversity in the contemporary Middle Eastern state**

As briefly mentioned above, the relationship between politics and diversity in the contemporary Middle East should not be reconsidered neither from a mere numeric or quantitative perspective nor from the idea of irreducible cultural and religious antagonisms. In fact, this approach risks trapping the analysis in a narrow continuum defined by two contradicting images of the region and its diverse population. On the one hand, looking at religious affiliations in absolute terms, one can be tempted to downsize this issue, pointing out that the Middle East does not really stand out for its religious diversity compared to the other continents: 93 percent of the population professes Islam, 4 percent are Christians and 2 percent Jews.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the stress placed on religious factors when dealing with the Middle East risks being easily dismissed as simple Orientalist projections. Nevertheless, this simple enumeration is far from being able to capture the complex geography of religious affiliations in the region and their deep roots. Middle Eastern religious diversity primarily manifests itself intra-religiously, through distinct denominations and religious traditions that cut across Islam, Christianity and Judaism. At the same time, the region is the homeland of some ancient religions

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6 P. Connor, C. Hackett, “Middle East's Christian Population in Flux as Pope Francis Visits Holy Land”, *Pew Research Center* (May 19, 2014).

whose adherents still dwell there and are strongly attached to their faiths, such as the Yezidis, Ahl ul-Haq or Kaka'i, Samaritans or Zoroastrians. Similarly, from the ethno-linguistic perspective, one can consider that the most important distinctions between Middle Eastern populations can be limited to the division between Arabs, Kurds, Persians and Turks, with Jews often included for specific political reasons. However, this approach totally ignores the wide variety of different ethnic groups that, although demographically a minority, have actively contributed to the history of this region through the centuries. At the same time, such an approach tends also to ignore that local political systems in the region have always been deeply influenced by overlapping but distinct religious, ethnics and cultural factors.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Middle East's diversity continues to be depicted as exceptional, in being a complex mosaic of unique sub-national identities and traditions. As a natural bridge between the West and the East, this region has represented one of the most important cradles of civilization and culture and over the centuries has become the homeland of different religions and ethnicities. According to such an understanding, diversity does not only exist, but it matters and is one of the major political and cultural drivers within the region.

Therefore, while the first approach seems to suggest the need to avoid exaggerating or considering exceptional the impact of diversity on the contemporary Middle East, the second perspective supports the exact opposite idea, reiterating the conviction that, given the complex Middle Eastern mosaic, diversity cannot avoid being a structural issue and an inevitable challenge in the history of the region. The contradiction between these two visions is problematic and confirms that it is not productive to deal with such a topic through a mere enumeration or distribution of the different ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious factors that are part of this wide region. Similarly, the conviction that such diversity is structurally doomed to conflict and create instability imposes a postulate essentially a-historical in its scope. Accordingly, a more institutional and historical perspective can provide a functional way out from this ambiguity, moving the focus of the analysis from that of diversity or its distribution *per se* to that of how it has been in-

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7 A. H. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947).

terpreted and re-imagined in the transition from empire to the modern nation-state.

Before and after the rise of Islam, Middle Eastern political systems historically developed according to the ideal of the empire, implicitly multi-ethnic and multi-religious in its scope, although this character did not explicitly take on particular significance in its political pattern. After the Arab conquest between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, Sunni Islam progressively became the dominant force inspiring the logics and rationales of political authority and power within the region. Religion, namely Islam, thus emerged as the predominant factor distinguishing and dividing people dwelling in this region.<sup>8</sup> Ethnicity played its role in terms of cultural signifier, but without a real political impact *per se*. It was thus absorbed within the more salient religious sphere, remaining stagnant and inactive until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. From a general standpoint, the Islamic state has never structurally perceived the non-Muslim presence as a challenge to get rid of through direct and forced assimilation or integration. Rather, it managed diversity by developing specific legal mechanisms and strategies that justified the existence of non-Muslim communities dwelling within its boundaries and territories. The concept of *dhimma* granted “protection” to the people of the recognized revealed religions (Christians, Jews, Sabaeans and later Zoroastrians, Hindus and Buddhists) in exchange for their acknowledgment of the domination of Islam. This placed them within a precise hierarchy of power, giving them a second-class status (as is often pointed out) but one that nevertheless permitted their existence and the preservation of the multilayered and intertwined diversity that is often cited as the Middle Eastern essence. Accordingly, toleration *per se* was not the parameter that inspired and explained the functioning of these mechanisms, but rather it was the outcome that proved the efficacy of such mechanisms in dealing with religious diversity and in accommodating different religious units and groups within the same polity and realm.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the inev-

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8 U. Furman, “Minorities in Contemporary Islamist Discourse”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36, 4 (October 2000), pp. 2-3.

9 A. N. Longva, “Citizenship in the Gulf States: Conceptualization and Practice”, in *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East: Approaches and Applications*, N. A. Butenschøn, U. Davis, M. S. Hassassian (eds.) (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

itable lack of centralization and intrusive power of the empire allowed wide margins of autonomy, favoring the fragmentation of today's Middle East into distinct local systems framed according to their logics, balances and *modus vivendi*. This remark is necessary in order to avoid reading Middle Eastern political history only according to the religious perspective. Micro-history proves that village, town, guild and tribal solidarities often played far more important roles than those played by the sole religious affiliation factor.

Moving to the last political empire experience that ruled over the region before the foundation of the modern Middle Eastern state, the Ottoman Empire continued to endorse such principles and logics, designing its specific administrative system (traditionally known as the *millet* system) to deal with diversity. Whether or not it had really existed as a uniform and systemic set of norms and rules before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *millet* system provided a model for managing religious diversity on the basis of self-administering communities subject to the superior power and authority of the Ottoman sultan.<sup>10</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the *millet* system evolved, becoming more integrated into the Empire's administration and systematized in what would become the modern Ottoman idea of religious communities (*ta'ifa diniyya*) in a state and a society that was later reconfigured according to the principle of equality thanks to the *Hatt-i Humayum* of 1856 and the administrative centralization pursued by the *tanzimat* reforms. During this period of reconfiguration of the Ottoman state, the relationship between politics and diversity began to change, producing contrasting effects. The legal equalization of Ottoman subjects going beyond the traditional distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims should have permitted reforming the Empire, strengthening its authority, legitimacy and central rule over its diverse society and territory. The reform of non-Muslim status was not an act of justice and toleration but expressed the desire to build a solid state with stable control over its society beyond the earlier autonomies and differences. Nevertheless, the combination of external interferences by Western powers and the distinct ambitions of different Ottoman communities fostered

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10 M. H. van den Boogert, "Millets: Past and Present", in *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-empowerment, Accommodation*, A. N. Longva, A. S. Roald (eds.) (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 27-30.

the rise of multiple secessionist and nationalist movements that progressively cast religious factors in ethno-national terms.<sup>11</sup> The reconfiguration between politics and diversity did not protect Ottoman sovereignty; rather it progressively produced the desegregation and contestation of Istanbul's authority from outside and within. This dynamic of politically emphasizing and mobilizing the distinctiveness and saliency of group identities and ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious specificities would soon impact on the first state- and nation-building processes that would be launched after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Versailles conferences in 1919.<sup>12</sup> It also shaped the first manifestations of nationalism and sectarianization within the Middle East. Istanbul's collapse not only represented a major political and military event in the history of region, but also testified to the failure of its system of managing and engaging diversity at the time of the modern nation-state's rising ideal.

During the first post-war decades, the management of diversity became an important political issue and a contested field within which local nationalist elites and Western powers contended in order to guide the state- and nation-building processes within the region. Through the modern idea of national minority ('*aqalliyat*'), the management of diversity emerged as one of the fields in which to impose authority and power and, at the same time, the issue of protection for national minorities became one of the *raisons d'être* of Western presences through the Mandates. Given its political importance, nationalist movements sought to de-politicize sub-national differences, oscillating between the Ottoman *millet* model, the ideal of the ethnic nation-state and the ambition to deal with Middle Eastern diversity in multi-ethnic states united under the majoritarian principle of Arabism or territorial nationalism.<sup>13</sup> It was

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11 K. H. Karpat, "Millets And Nationality: The Roots of the Incongruity of Nation and State in the Post-Ottoman Era", in *Christians And Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, B. Braude, B. Lewis (eds.) (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982).

12 P. Sluglett, "From Millet to Minority: Another Look at the Non-Muslim Communities in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century", in *Minorities and the Modern Arab World: New Perspectives*, L. Robson (ed.) (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016).

13 S. Zubaida, "Contested nations: Iraq and the Assyrians", *Nations and Nationalism*, 6, 3 (2000), p. 364.



according to this perspective that both Mandate and nationalist authorities set the conditions for their specific interpretations of the twin categories of majority and minority, implementing the concepts of the territorial state and representational government. In particular, the religious perspective and the related principle of protecting 'religious minorities' were considered suitable by both Mandate authorities and nationalists to achieve their objectives, while ethnic diversity was widely ignored or opposed because considered an unacceptable contradiction for the rising Arab state. The Mandate Powers saw in it the possibility to revive their traditional claim of 'protecting' the Middle East's non-Muslim population, legitimizing their colonial design under the ideal of the Mandate.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, through the 'language' of protecting national minorities, they legitimated their strategy of ruling through *divide et impera*, categorizing diversity as the sum of clear and evident separate human and cultural clusters reluctant to dissolve into the new proposed polity and society. On the other hand, nationalists found this schema acceptable as long as it did not embrace ethno-linguistic factors threatening the ideal of the unity of the Arab or territorial nation. This dynamic became even more complex because now the central state had both the ambition and the capability to impose its authority, power and narrative on all the diverse communities living within its boundaries. Inevitably, local potentates rebelled against central state's intrusive power, fearful of losing their traditional autonomy.<sup>15</sup> The entanglement between these positions and axes of confrontation established the controversial legacy on which later, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the post-colonial states in the Middle East won their independence, complicating the relationship between politics and diversity within the region. Accordingly, behind the issue of protecting national minorities and managing diversity lay a far more complex political dynamic produced by conflicts between the external powers, state authorities and the different local political units dwelling within the new "national" territories.

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14 H. Müller-Sommerfeld, "The League of Nations, A-Mandates and Minority Rights during the Mandate Period in Iraq (1920-1932)", in *Modernity, Minority, and the Public Sphere: Jews and Christians in the Middle East*, S. R. Goldstein-Sabah, H. L. Murre-van den Berg (eds.) (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 263-265.

15 S. Zubaida, "Contested nations", p. 372.

This brief overview suggests that diversity has never been considered of strategic importance *per se*, but has progressively become politically salient as one of the nodes in the articulation of the modern Middle Eastern state system. Moreover, ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious boundaries continued to be of strategic importance, as did their politicization, because continuously renewed and revived according to the mutations in the international and national balances of power.<sup>16</sup>

This enduring dynamic of confrontation and contestation structurally undermined Middle Eastern states, caging them within a sort of inescapable political short circuit. The more the modern state has been constantly challenged within and from outside its boundaries, showing a structural lack in terms of hegemony (weak state),<sup>17</sup> the more authoritarianism and dictatorship imposed themselves with the promise of defending the state and the nation from these challenges, bargaining legitimacy and authority with conformity through the imposition of fierce rule or clientelism.<sup>18</sup> In order to overcome its shortcomings and limitations, the Middle Eastern state and its agencies reacted against expressions of dissent or distinction, either repressing and negating or co-opting and dealing with leaderships of different sectors of society, granting material benefits in return for loyalty and conformity. This situation entangled nationalist and community leaderships in a continuous dynamic of confrontations and political bargaining, enhancing communalism and fragmentation. “Unity” and “pluralism” remained principles widely fictitious and rhetorical; extreme poles of a continuum within which this dynamic developed, and parameters for judging conformity with the regime in power or that of each community and group with their respective leaderships. The central authorities reacted against these dynamics, seeking to transcend sectarian and community identities not through inclusion but rather by their negation, giving form to exclusionary nation-building pro-

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16 *Ibid.*, p. 363.

17 J. Migdal, *Strong States and Weak Societies: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).  
N. N. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 1995).

18 N. Hashemi, D. Postel “Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 15, 3 (2017), pp. 3-5.

cesses.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, community elites and hierarchies reacted against this stance, stressing precisely the status and influence of their own particular culture and group identity in order to survive and to establish new deals and bargains with the regime in power.

Such a *modus vivendi* endured beyond the short nationalist period between the 1950s and the 1960s. The so-called ‘return of religion to politics’, with the watershed 1979 Iranian Revolution, did not bring real transformation to these positions.

Rather, it launched a new phase of activation, manipulation and politicization of identities, dividing between those who sought to conquer the public space by imposing personal understandings of the role of Islam in politics and those who, being structurally excluded from this discourse, inevitably found viable strategies for survival withdrawing within the limits of their communities, stressing their distinctiveness, or emigrating. Furthermore, the “return of religion to politics” did not really mean a process of making polity and society more “religious”. Rather, overlapping with previous discourses, this dynamic simply re-oriented the political confrontation, raising the role of religion as a cultural and identity marker and progressively re-ethnicizing and re-comunitarizing religious affiliations.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, Middle Eastern state-building processes developed under the pressure of achieving full independence from colonial powers and resisting various external influences and pressures. On the one hand, religious and ethno-linguistic diversity had been overshadowed by prioritizing the ideal of the “strong state” and “homogenous nation”. A message that has pervaded and shaped political fields and public spaces in the region for decades. On the other, diversity had been institutionalized and politically empowered with religious and ethnic groups establishing their own parties and competing for political power. In both cases, the modern state and its control became either a political objective to be attained or an enemy from which to defend and protect. The recurrent reference to defending the unity of nation, the independence of the state or the autonomy of the com-

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19 F. Haddad, “‘Marked’ for Exclusion: The Problem of Pluralism, State-building, and Communal Identities in Iraq and the Arab World”, *The Middle East Institute* (August 5, 2014), pp. 3-4.

20 S. Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, pp. 88-102.

munity progressively became rhetorical, hiding the real purpose of preserving the existence of authoritarian regimes or defending the prerogatives of traditional community leaderships.

## **2. Politics, diversity and the myths of stability: the construction of power in 20<sup>th</sup> century Iraq**

The history of modern Iraq is often viewed from a precise idea of what are considered the most relevant ethno-linguistic and religious factors that, cutting across its society and polity, have always played a primary role in national politics. This specifically pertains to the Arab-Kurdish and the Sunni-Shi'a divide. Two different axes and poles of possible confrontation and political mobilization that have widely monopolized Iraqi politics, immediately manifesting their potential from the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through different acts of rebellion, from those organized by the Kurds in 1923, 1932 and 1943 to those guided by Arab Shiites in 1920 and 1935.<sup>21</sup> These upheavals and insurrections broke out for different reasons and with distinct scopes. They were not simply against the Iraqi state. They frequently sought either to impose alternative visions of the state and the nation or to assert the distinctiveness of their respective communities or local balances of power in order to gain access to the new modern state or influence from below the state- and nation-building processes developing within the region.<sup>22</sup>

Accordingly, aside from studies on Eastern Christianity or minorities in the region, the local Christian presence is rarely counted as an important perspective from which to rethink to the Iraqi state and how it was projected and developed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the historical vicissitude of their integration into the new Iraqi political field offers a privileged perspective. First, being divided between different denominations and having lived within distinct local socio-political systems with their own balances of powers and logics, Christians could not be considered as one solid socio-political unit. Widely sharing this condition with other communities and groups residing in the territories that are now Iraq, they approached the state

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21 S. Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 228.

22 R. Redaelli, A. Plebani, *L'Iraq contemporaneo* (Roma: Carocci, 2013).

differently, from negotiation to participation and even physical confrontation. This plurality of stances makes it possible to rethink the political significance of diversity from different perspectives and according to different political purposes, pointing out the reasons that made it emerge as an important issue in the process of fulfilling the promises of an independent and sovereign nation-state within this region. Secondly, as a consequence of the post-WWI conferences of Versailles (1919), Sèvres (1920) and Lausanne (1924), diversity (or better, the protection of national minorities) became the crux of a controversial competition between colonial powers and opposing ethno-nationalist projects. The Christians of Iraq found themselves in the midst of these confrontations as both a minority community eligible for special protection and as an aspiring “nation” that claimed its right to be equally recognized in its cultural and ethnic distinctiveness. As a result, being caught in the middle of this controversial dynamic and expressing different views regarding their political destiny, their perspective can elucidate the multiple implications and impacts of the Iraqi state and nation-building process on the local socio-political fabrics. This makes it possible to go beyond the simple inter-religious framework of a difficult relationship between a Muslim majority and a non-Muslim minority to enter that of politics and nationalism. Finally, the inconsistency between their demographic numbers, not large enough to compete with the other dominant groups, and their resolute demands for political recognition and autonomy overexposed their position and frequently turned the Christians of Iraq into a sort of political scapegoat. Their political testament shows how violence and power have been instrumentally employed by Iraqi authorities to impose from above both the state and the nation on all of the country's diverse elements.<sup>23</sup> The history of Iraqi Christians is not just a vicissitude of participation, negotiation or exclusion and marginalization, but also of persecution and repression beyond simple cultural frameworks. Therefore, it summarizes and covers the full spectrum of politics, epitomizing the difficult development of a process of founding a state and a nation in a region strongly stressed by geopolitical

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23 S. Donabed, “Rethinking nationalism and an appellative conundrum: historiography and politics in Iraq”, *National Identities* 14, 2 (2012).

competitions and cut through by distinct political ambitions and projects.<sup>24</sup>

Before entering into the details of some of the most important events that marked the Iraqi Christian presence during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is worthwhile to briefly mention some characteristics of this community. This is important to pointing out some of the conditions that have affected and influenced their political involvement in and engagement with Iraqi politics since the post-Great War period. At the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Christians were divided between distinct denominations, ethno-linguistic forms of primary identification and territories, dwelling in areas that span across today's Iran (Urmia under the authority of Teheran), Iraq (predominantly in the area of Mosul), north-eastern Syria and south-eastern Turkey (Diyarbakir, Mardin and Tur Abdin).<sup>25</sup> At the end of the war, this multi-vocality represented a complex challenge because it inevitably acquired a unique political scope in a period of state- and nation-building processes that drastically and quickly redesigned the old traditional Ottoman boundaries and spheres under the pressure of contrasting forces. On the one hand, Christians were divided between the Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Chaldean Catholics, the Church of the East (ecclesiastically also known as the Assyrian Church of the East), and finally Latin (Roman Catholic) and Protestant communities that had developed thanks to the presence of Western missionaries. Syriac and Chaldean ecclesiastical authorities engaged the British administration at the time of the Mandate and the Hashemite Monarchy with the intent to be recognized in their specific religious and church identities according to the Ottoman *millet* model and the new ideal of the protection of minorities.<sup>26</sup>

The Assyrian Church, instead, positioned itself as the pole around which to unite the local Christian presence in order to manifest

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24 K. Girling, "'To Live within Islam': The Chaldean Catholic Church in modern Iraq, 1958-2003", *Studies in Church History*, 51 (2015), pp. 373-376.

25 A. O'Mahony, "Eastern Christianity in Modern Iraq", in *Eastern Christianity. Studies in Modern History, Religion and Politics*, A. O'Mahony (ed.) (London: Melisinde, 2004). S. Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq. Its Origins and Development to the Present Day* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2006).

26 A. O'Mahony, "The Chaldean Catholic Church: The Politics of Church-state Relations in Modern Iraq", *The Heythrop Journal*, 45, (2004), p. 463

a common will to be integrated into the contemporary Middle East as a distinct nation with its own political dignity and rights. On the other hand, Christians entered the period of the Iraqi state-building process with different political legacies and memories. During the Ottoman era they dwelled within distinct local systems and lifestyles. A large part of this community was living in the plain of Mosul (predominantly affiliated with the Chaldean Church) and was more integrated with the rest of the Arab population. Another component had found refuge within the mountains of Hakkäri through the centuries.<sup>27</sup> This remote area permitted the development of an autonomous tribal system, only nominally under the supreme authority of the Sultan, based on a close intertwining with the ecclesiastical dimension of the Assyrian Church through a hereditary scheme based on episcopal families. Moreover, this particular ecclesiastical-tribal system had a close relationship with the Kurdish tribes living in the same territories. The Assyrian Patriarch was not only the supreme ecclesiastical authority of its denomination and Church, but also a political leader and a hereditary title.<sup>28</sup> This condition not only describes a particular association between politics and religion, but also explains why at the fall of the Ottoman Empire Assyrians manifested a strong sense of distinctiveness and pride in their traditional autonomy and military power.<sup>29</sup>

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and increasingly through the First World War period, the Christians of the Hakkäri became the focal point of the development of a proto-nationalist sentiment that sought to affirm its uniqueness in terms of both ethno-linguistic and religious identity with the aim of reuniting all Christians living in this wide strip of land as members of a united Assyrian nation, thus different from Arabs and Kurds.

Not all Christians of Syriac tradition embraced such a project.

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27 A. J. Arberry, *Religion in the Middle East: Three Religions in Concord and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) pp. 521-530. F. Hellot, "La Fin d'un Monde: les Assyro-Chaldéens et la Première Guerre Mondiale", in *Chrétiens du Monde Arabe. Un Archipel en Terre d'Islam*, B. Heyberger (ed.) (Paris: Autrement, 2003), pp. 127-132.

28 P. Rondot, "Les Tribus montagnardes de l'Asie antérieure. Quelques aspects sociaux des populations kurdes et assyriennes", *Bulletin d'études orientales*, 6 (1936), pp. 20-32.

29 H. Teule, *Les Assyro-chaldéens. Chrétiens d'Iran, de Turquie et d'Irak* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).

Nonetheless, in what would become modern Iraq this ideal progressively developed and gained support. Therefore, even before the First World War, ancient terms such as “Assyrian” and “Chaldean” had begun transforming. From being strictly related to church and liturgical dimensions, they came also to express the existence of a single “nation”, ethnically distinct and speaking a common language, namely Syriac. During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tribalism and pro-nationalism intertwined and overlapped, widening their scope, embracing Christians affiliated with other denominations and living in territories outside the narrow limits of the Hakkäri.

The First World War represented the decisive catalyst, the hotbed for the emergence of Assyrian nationalism. A dynamic that was widely affected by the suffering of a large part of this community, forced into the condition of refugees and exiled after having dreamt of winning their right to found an independent state fighting alongside the Allies. In fact, following Moscow's decision to enlist Ottoman Armenians in its army, the Assyrians of the Hakkäri and those of Urmia went to war on the side of Russia and Britain.<sup>30</sup> This choice almost immediately had tragic consequences for this community. Already in 1915, the Assyrians were forced to seek refuge in the western Azerbaijan provinces occupied by the Russians, in Urmia and Salmas. In 1918, when the Russians withdrew and their Patriarch and political leader (Mar Shimun) was assassinated by a Kurdish tribal leader, the Assyrians found themselves alone. Initially, the British seemed ready to give them support, but their promises only led them to move again to new refugee camps. They were first invited to head toward Hamadan and then to take refuge in the camp of Ba‘quba, from where they were redirected to Mindan (1920-1921) and finally settled in Dohuk and Aqrah (1921-1933). During these years, some Assyrians continued to fight as members of the Levies enlisted by London and deployed to contain Kurdish forces and enforce law after the end of the war.<sup>31</sup> Afterwards, and having been expelled from the Hakkäri in 1924, northern Iraq became their new home. Therefore, in the span of

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30 J. Yacoub, “La question assyro-chaldéenne, les puissances européennes et la Société des Nations”, *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, n. 151 (1988), pp. 103-120.

31 S. Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*, pp. 141-145.



a few years, from having waged war against Constantinople, the Assyrian found themselves refugees in another country that they did not consider theirs, and permanently banned from a territory that had been considered their homeland for centuries and where from the second-half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they had been dreaming of founding their state.<sup>32</sup>

The years between 1919 and 1932 were a period of a gradual but inexorable frustration of all the previous projects of giving birth to an independent Assyrian state. After their expulsion from Turkey and the settlement between Iraq-Syria-Turkey of Mosul in 1925, it first became clear that a consistent part of the Assyrians would remain within the new state of Iraq and then that neither a Kurdish nor an Assyrian state would have ever become feasible in the near future. Therefore, the short British Mandate period (1921-1935) did not bring the Assyrians any positive solution, ending their dreams of independence, detaching them from their original areas of residence and contributing to worsen their relations with the other Iraqi communities through their enlistment in special military units (the Levies) for the purpose of supporting the Mandate.

Moreover, this period contributed to further fragmenting the Christian presence beyond the existing inter-denominational divide and lifestyles, separating those who were still active in lobbying for the interest of an Assyrian nation from those who became progressively convinced that it would have been wiser to negotiate with the new state authorities for specific guarantees as a protected religious minority and equal citizens, embracing the Hashemite monarchy's and Arabism's discourse.

Between 1932 and 1933 the situation reached a tragic climax. London increasingly showed interest in finding a new *modus vivendi* for Iraq. The Mandate was considered too burdensome and the possibility of recognizing an independent Arab state under the Hashemite monarchy came to be seen as the best solution to preserve British ascendancy over the country without being excessively involved in its daily politics. The termination of the Mandate in Iraq (1932) and recognition of the sovereignty of the new state of Iraq triggered a com-

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32 F. Hellot, "Les Assyro-Chaldéens de Perse et du Hakkari: des migrations en exil (1835-1935)", *Études Kurdes*, 7 (2005), pp. 84-94.

plex dynamic of change and adaptation to the new political conditions. The Iraqi government was called upon to prove its legitimacy and authority by asserting its power and direct rule within the state's boundaries. At the same time, a number of local potentates promptly reacted, understanding that the opening of a new phase in the state- and nation-building process would inevitably bring their past autonomies and prerogatives to an end.<sup>33</sup> Assyrians were among the first to raise their voices, trying to advocate for their rights at Western chancelleries. Not only did recognition of the Iraqi state sound a death-knell for their political project, but the departure of the British would abandon them to the new state authorities expressly promoting Arabism, after having coped with London's enforcing the law and forbidding any insubordination against the Mandate. Concerns about being blackmailed as agents of foreign powers would show almost immediately to be far more than a remote risk.

In 1933, during different episodes of looting in Dohuk and Zaxho that saw the involvement of Kurdish tribes and the Iraqi army, the massacre of Assyrians in Simele was the tragic outcome of this short transitory period.<sup>34</sup> An event that is still widely discussed in its mechanics in order to establish who fired first between the Assyrians and the Iraqi army, but which nonetheless left a vivid memory on this community beyond the issue of the culprit and its root causes. The Simele massacre forced some of the survivors to seek refuge in Syria, reducing the demographic balance of a presence already strained by the war. The massacre also contributed to making the word "Assyrian" a contested concept, either considered unacceptable and to be banned by the Iraqi nationalist leaderships or a term describing a martyred nation subdued and forced to disperse in diaspora.<sup>35</sup> The silence of the international community during these events and the expulsion of Patriarch Mar Shimun first to Cyprus and then, from Geneva, Paris, London to finally Chicago where the Church of the East consolidated, symbolized the drastic end of the post-war dreams of the Assyrians.<sup>36</sup>

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33 S. Zubaida, "Contested nations", pp. 364-366.

34 R. Sempill Stafford, *The tragedy of the Assyrians* (London: Routledge 2009; original 1935).

35 S. Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, p. 228.

36 S. Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*, pp. 145-147.

Therefore, beyond chronicles and memories of the violence, Simele soon came to condense multiple political significances clearly manifesting the intricate competition between opposing psychological understandings of the events taking place during those years.

With the termination of the Mandate in 1932, the Hashemite monarchy took responsibility for the state- and nation-building process within the country according to a precise idea of its mission and the conditions under which this task should be fulfilled. The Crown saw the Iraqi social fabric as “unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatever”.<sup>37</sup> The Iraqi state authorities thus perceived that the foundation of the nation and the state was first and foremost a political and cultural battle of “order” and “modernity” against “disorder” and “backwardness”.<sup>38</sup> Iraq would be finally created getting rid of this set of distinct socio-political clusters by including Iraqi diversity either by force or negotiation, but substantially in both cases negating any political role to it. Kurdish or Assyrian nationalist particularisms were considered unacceptable.

Members of these communities could only be recognized as citizens and juridically equal members of a nation and a state inexorably Arab in its scope, providing them only with some special guarantees or limited special treatment. Christians would be protected because of their different religious identity, while Kurds would receive some sort of guarantees in consequence of their demographic weight, but without any public political recognition of their ethnic distinctiveness. The position adopted was thus quite consequential to such an understanding. Simele came to represent one of the public stages on which to project such an understanding and impose this discourse. Violence and military power were instrumentally employed to instruct and redeem the insubordinate fragments of the Iraqi Arab nation, namely its “internal enemies”.

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37 H. Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 25-26.

38 S. Zubaida, “Contested nations”, p. 366.

Indeed, the termination of the Mandate triggered two different psychological urgencies. On the one hand, local potentates and political systems that since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had already begun to speak the language of nationalism looking at Western powers such Britain and France, as the Assyrians did, felt betrayed and overcome by chancelleries and diplomacy, strongly raising their voices to preserve past autonomies and resist integration within the modern centralized state. On the other, the nationalist leaderships in power felt it necessary to speed up the state- and nation-building process, resisting and opposing both external influences and local particularism.<sup>39</sup> What the former perceived as the inalienable battle for self-determination and self-administration, the latter interpreted as the legitimate defence of the state and the nation against its internal enemies, the insubordinates intriguing and conspiring with Western powers against the Iraqi national project. Diversity was not refused *per se*, but rather became the focal point of this political battle. Simele thus represented the “sacrifice” of a demographic minority caught in the middle of this dynamic. It became an easy target for the nationalist leadership. The Assyrian condition was already critical and their military and demographic weight inconsistent with the central state. They became a public example of the triumph of the heroes of the Arab nation.<sup>40</sup> This act of nationalist justice was also possible and did not harm the monarchy because Christians were substantially abandoned by Western powers and the international community that accepted the Iraqi authorities' version that Simele was a case of punishing insubordinates and not of violating the clauses of the Declaration of Guarantees for the protection of minorities signed in 1932.<sup>41</sup> In order to prove this version, the Iraqi government confirmed precise guarantees for Christians and their ecclesiastical institutions. Since their distinct religious identity did not contradict Arab nationalism and Iraqi discourse, they were granted reserved seats in both parliament chambers and the Chaldean Patriarch was allowed to participate in the Senate. The politicization

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39 S. Zubaida, “The Fragments Imagine the Nation”, pp. 205-206.

40 S. Zubaida, “Contested nations”, pp. 366-367.

41 H. Müller-Sommerfeld, “The League of Nations”, pp. 263-264.

of ethnic divisions was not tolerated. Assyrians could be recognized and integrated solely as a religious minority.<sup>42</sup>

Such a *modus vivendi* and psychological approach toward the relationship between politics and diversity remained constant during the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Iraq. In fact, after the military coup in 1958 by ‘Abd al- Karim Qasim and his second-in-command Abdul Salam ‘Arif, the solution of minority issues and integration of diversity remained promises subject to the primary concern of defending the state and the regime in power.<sup>43</sup> Later on, the second conquest of power by the Ba‘ath party in 1968 did not change this approach toward the multifarious Iraqi society. Quite the contrary, the country witnessed a new phase of pronounced confrontation between conflicting political projects.

This dynamic was characterized by a twin process.

On the one hand, the Ba‘ath rulers showed an immediate interest in promoting a precise and unquestionable interpretation of what the Iraqi state, society and nation should be. The Ba‘ath party showed concrete interest in and a solid will to appropriate the Iraqi past, de-structuring and reconstructing it according to its own ideal of nation: Arab and Ba‘athist.<sup>44</sup> Diversity was possible within the narrow limits imposed by the regime, either appeasing and negotiating with it or militating within the Ba‘ath party, as a considerable component of Christians did.<sup>45</sup> The “fragments” of the nation thus had to accept being totally de-politicized and relegated to secondary importance within the public space.<sup>46</sup> Those who conformed to this vision obtained dividends and guarantees. For example, the Chaldean Church and the Ancient Church of the East (separated from the Church of the East in the early 1960s and more interested in preserving the purity of its ecclesiastical traditions than in advocating for the rights of the Assyrian

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42 H. Teule, “Christians in Iraq an Analysis of Some Recent Political Developments”, *Der Islam*, 88, 1 (2012), pp. 180-181.

43 S. Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*, pp. 147-148; S. Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, pp. 148-150.

44 J. Yacoub, “La marginalisation des chrétiens d’Irak”, *Confluences Méditerranée*, 3 (2008), pp. 89-91.

45 K. Girling, “‘To Live within Islam’: The Chaldean Catholic Church in modern Iraq, 1958–2003”, *Studies in Church History*, 51 (2015), p. 376.

46 S. Zubaida, “The Fragments Imagine the Nation”, pp. 205-208.

nations) were able to negotiate their positions and presence with the regime. Accordingly, although the Chaldean Church was unable to prevent the nationalization of its schools, in the early 1980s the regime agreed to abstain from full assimilation of its organizations into the Iraqi administrative system.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the Ba'ath regime allowed Christians to build new churches and to develop their ecclesiastical networks.<sup>48</sup> Against this background, diversity was confined to being an irrelevant parameter within the wider project of achieving Arabization and Ba'athification under the Saddam Hussein personality cult.<sup>49</sup> These became the real frameworks in which diversity would be tolerated. Substantially, it would be assimilated through acculturation, political negation and indoctrination. The rhetoric of the unity and indivisibility of the state predominated over any group or community.

On the other hand, the Ba'athist project and *modus operandi* triggered fierce reactions. Already in the early 1960s an armed autonomist movement begun to develop in the areas inhabited by Kurds and Assyrians. The 1970s were a decade of direct confrontation between the central government and these groups, escalating into a full military campaign carried out by the regime to clean the northern borders. At the start of the 1970s, the Assyrians gave birth to the Assyrian Democratic Movement, inspired by the predominately diaspora-based Assyrian Universal Alliance.<sup>50</sup> Finally, in the midst of the Anfal military campaign against autonomist Kurds, the Assyrians and Chaldeans were directly targeted, again becoming the scapegoats of the ongoing conflict, the easy target to punish what was perceived as an unacceptable act of insubordination fed by foreign elements.<sup>51</sup>

The word Assyrian again became a synonym for political sedition. While Kurds obtained a certain margin of negotiations because of their demographic weight and political-military power, Christians were principally targeted without any possible aperture for their political demands as a distinct ethno-linguistic minority and faced political and socio-economic persecution. They were allowed to live as a reli-

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47 A. O'Mahony, "The Chaldean Catholic Church", pp. 443-444.

48 J. Yacoub, "La marginalization", pp. 88-89.

49 S. Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, p. 187.

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 198-200.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

gious minority and citizens of an Arabic Iraqi state, but never as a recognized national minority, ethno-linguistically distinct.

Therefore, reducing such a history to a unique and unceasing vicissitude of religious persecution or simply of denial of diversity on the basis of an irreducible cultural bias would be too simplistic. Negotiation, marginalization and confrontation were the results of a far more complex political dynamic that proceeded in parallel.<sup>52</sup> The Assyrian's experience was one of political "otherization" and "demonization" aimed at imposing a monolithic identity of the Iraqi state and nation. Diversity was not assaulted *per se* or negated in absolute but the regime proved unwilling to admit its political legitimacy in the public space, especially if framed according to the language of ethnicity. The need to promote a precise idea of society and nation was considered indispensable in consolidating the authority and legitimacy of a state endemically weak and of regimes that were imposed by force and through *coups d'état*. Such an attitude and behavior inevitably produced counter-reactions. Diversity and distinctiveness became political facts, fostering the politicization of identities and sectarianization. The battle was equally framed on both fronts as one for existence and survival. Still in the process of being consolidated, the state and its hegemony remained weak, while the regime increased its harshness in order to get rid of any possible obstacles concealing and overlooking its limits. Demographically minority groups, such as the Assyrians, were thus easy scapegoats against whom to instrumentally exert violence and repression with the aim of prevailing in this existential confrontation. Some of the features that would characterize post-Saddam Iraq, such as retribalization and sectarianization, were already in motion.

### **3. Religion in the service of politics. The Iraqi crisis and the Organization of the Islamic State**

Today's wave of uprisings and civil wars has again turned the spotlight on the condition and destiny of diversity within the Middle East. The vicious circle of violence and polarizations openly call into question the role of diversity under two apparently contradicting per-

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<sup>52</sup> E. Davis, *Memories of state: Politics, history, and collective identity in modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

spectives. On the one hand, the present turmoil is addressed and explained as a crisis of minorities, from the political, economic and sociological to those traditionally defined according to ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious factors.

These minorities have been considered the main actors of the revolts, although they have been promptly turned into the victims of geopolitical and power competitions.

In this framework, weaker demographic minorities are predicted to progressively disappear from the region or be reduced to even more irrelevant numbers and marginalities. On the other, religious radicalism and sectarianization proved that irreducible religious identities and group solidarities are deemed to be among the most important factors of present turmoil.

Either as victim or driver, diversity is considered central in the analysis of today's Middle Eastern politics. As mentioned earlier, this importance does not derive from the concept itself or its spatial distribution. Rather, this centrality is determined by the progress of a new phase of pronounced redefinition of how diversity is understood politically and institutionally. At the core of this dynamic stands the state both as focus and arena of present competitions. The situation inevitably grew more complex and controversial because uprisings, civil wars and geopolitical rivalries have stressed the traditional weaknesses of the Middle Eastern state, turning them into evident fragilities, destabilizing the entire social fabric and politically activating diversity in public space. This condition is manifest in two political dynamics. State boundaries have become open to negotiation, as has the definition of who is entitled to be part of the "new" *demos*. Violence and conflict erupted as a strategic choice to take control of the state or prevent the Other from achieving this political objective. Accordingly, since 2003 the history of Iraq shows that these two perspectives need to be equally accounted for in order to situate and reconsider the role of diversity in today's Middle East politics.

The post-Saddam era presents a complexity that cannot be easily assessed by the present work. The ousting of the dictator and his regime by the US-led military initiative was welcomed by a significant part of international community, with many hopes and expectations. However, the post-Saddam state-building process immediately



encountered difficult challenges, entering the ongoing stalemate. On the one hand, the contested 2005 constitution sought to achieve a difficult balance combining a new monolithic interpretation of Iraqi society and the state, now enshrined in the supremacy of Islam as a fundamental source for legislation and the binding feature of the new Iraqi *demos*, with the expansion of guarantees for the distinct ethno-linguistic and religious communities dwelling within the country. On the other, the fall of the dictator opened the field to competition for control of the state. Both dynamics have drastically destabilized the country.<sup>53</sup> The Iraqi political momentum has been monopolized by the confrontation between Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds, while Christians have sought new space and positions within this new systematization. The civil war erupted in 2006, widely sectarian in scope, manifested all these contradictions. Assyrian, Chaldean and Syriac Christians severely suffered from the conflict. By the end of 2013, from a population of more than a million, the Christians living in Iraq were estimated to be no more than 300.000 to 500.000, with approximately 80 percent of their Churches destroyed or damaged and abandoned.

Although one can consider this situation the inevitable consequence and spillover of the civil war, Christians felt themselves to be under a concrete existential threat, being targeted both for their religious identity and in being a national minority increasingly perceived as marginal to the wider political dynamic. Their condition became even more insecure than in the past, given the absence or fragility of the central government, structurally absorbed by the war. Polarizations prevailed as well as mistrust and uncertainty. New projects for separating and achieving autonomy on the basis of the Assyrian nationalist ideal emerged along with Kurd activism, while most of the community was forced to take refuge abroad or in the north of the country, far from Baghdad and the territories where Sunnis and Shiites were fighting.

Therefore, in recent years the re-conceptualization of the role of diversity within the Iraqi state and its social fabric has developed within a political context dominated by the clash between new non-state militant and terrorist actors and opposing centers of power that

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53 J. Yacoub, "La marginalization", pp. 89-90; Saad Salloum, "Minorities in Iraq: memory, identity and challenges", *Masarat* (2013), pp. 11-12.

have activated and exploited religious identities to pursue their own political agendas. In this climate of contestation and fragility, *Da'ish* launched its message, manipulating and fomenting mistrusts and divisions to advance its particular interpretation of polity and society within this region.

Apparently, the Organization of the Islamic State and its *raison d'être* seem to go beyond the topics analyzed in this work. The only point of contact could be considered its cruelty and violence against minorities and any form of expression that differs from its specific understanding and interpretation of Islam.

According to this perspective, putting religious factors at the core of its propaganda and ideology as well as equally addressing all Muslims whatever their race, language and origins, *Da'ish* distanced itself from 20<sup>th</sup> century forms of politics, formally presenting as anti-national. *Da'ish* directed its call to join its ranks to the entire *umma*, the global Islamic community. Consequently, this organization has been primarily analyzed under the double framework of global terrorism-Islamist militant activism and as one of the most recent manifestations of religious radicalism. Nonetheless, *Da'ish's* performance and posture showed that religious intolerance and obscurantism is just a specific character and attribute of an attitude, scope and *modus operandi* essentially nationalistic.<sup>54</sup>

Equally, its global posture is both strategic and tactical, showing an ambition to expand that does not negate spatiality but instead confirms it and its necessity to be achieved.

Developing a global agenda and exerting direct control over territories of high symbolical and geopolitical weight, *Da'ish* became not only a source of inspiration for a wide array of individuals in search of a new religious mission, but also sought to impose itself as a force that aims at founding a new state with a distinct and specific identity centered on an “original” interpretation of Islam. In so doing, *Da'ish* in Iraq undoubtedly showed an ambition to determine the boundaries and the content of a new polity and society with a precise conceptualization of duties and rights, conditions of “citizenship” and space for

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54 E. Hughes, “Nationalism by Another Name: Examining “Religious Radicalism” from the Perspective of Iraq's Christians”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 15, 2 (2017), pp. 35-36.

diversity. *Da'ish* could thus be reconsidered as a manifestation of religious nationalism expressing another possible instrumental re-formulation of the relationship between violence, identity and diversity in contemporary politics with some points of contact with the dynamics analyzed before.<sup>55</sup>

*Da'ish's* process of “otherization” is brutal and simplistic in its stance and purpose. Its enemies are not just non-Muslims and non-Sunnis, but also any form of diversity and dissent that does not recognize its identity or conform to what the organization proposes.<sup>56</sup> Diversity *per se* thus became proof of dissent and insubordination, against which violence is legitimate and necessary. This very categorical framework makes *Da'ish's* enemies the most natural vehicle for imposing its monopoly of violence within a given territory.

The punishment and elimination of diversity have been considered essential for the creation of its state or proto-state in order to set its boundaries and spheres. The violence against diversity, within and outside Islam, has been employed to create a new order and hierarchies, pursuing standardization and uniformity within the dominated geography, selecting who is entitled to dwell under its rule.

Therefore, from June 2014 until July 2017, *Da'ish* sought to impose one of the most radical and deviant visions of the principle of the modern nation-state.

In order to achieve its political project, *Da'ish* deliberately organizes its propaganda and *modus operandi* around a sort of scenic contradiction between the peaceful and harmonious condition of those who accept its message, becoming members and citizens of its polity, and the suffering and demonization of those that have refused to “be redeemed”.

Accordingly, this organization has carefully projected this communication and operative strategy, subduing and exploiting diversity, making it the enemy and the tool of its political project. At the beginning of its military projection, the decision to focus almost exclusively

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55 M. Demichelis, P. Maggiolini, *The Struggle to Define a Nation. Rethinking Religious Nationalism in Contemporary Islamic World* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017).

56 A. Plebani, P. Maggiolini, “The Centrality of the Enemy in al-Baghdadi's Caliphate”, in *Twitter and Jihad: the communication strategy of ISIS*, M. Maggioni, P. Magri (eds.) (Milano: ISPI, 2015).

on Iraqi Shiites was probably motivated by the will to give substance to the fight against the Iraqi central state, in view of the so-called ‘liberation’ of the country from oppressive rule.<sup>57</sup> Later, after the capture of Mosul and the assault against Jabal Sinjar, Christians and Yazidis widely dwelling there became the easiest symbolic targets to generate significant media coverage and epitomize the vision of *Da‘ish*'s founding polity and society. Portraying the enemy as an ethical and ontological threat ensured *Da‘ish*'s ability to focus the battle's objective and provide motivation to its fighters. Moreover, it became central to fix the state's and society's boundaries, establishing a precise system of control over its inhabitants. Diversity has been thus engaged and assaulted according to the convenience of this organization that only apparently fully endorses Islamic religious prescriptions regarding non-Muslims living in an Islamic state, namely *dhimma*. *Da‘ish* militants showed this double, instrumental-tactical and strategic stance during the occupation of Raqqa (February 2014) and Mosul (summer of 2014).<sup>58</sup> The policy of exterminating and purging Christians became the means of imposing itself in both cities. 84 Moreover, the reference to the *dhimma* was instrumental in order to present two “constitutions” (Raqqa-February 2014) and Mosul (July 2014) by means of which *Da‘ish* concretely imposed the new political boundaries under its rule. In fact, in Mosul, the organization gave people only 48 hours to make the choice between embracing Islam or leaving the city. In a *crescendo* of cruelty, this terrorist group manipulated the suffering and humiliation of these victims as a clear and unequivocal manifesto of its military might where its unwavering devotion to the annihilation of the Other served a clear political project aimed at founding a new “state”. The decision to mark the property of Christians with the Arabic letter “nun” (*nasara* – a derogatory word for Christians) and that of Shiites and Shabaks communities with the Arabic letter “ra” (*rafida* – in sum, he who rejects the Sunni orthodoxy) perfectly epitomized its will to spatialize terror and bewilderment. The same tactic was used against places of worship, cemeteries and artistic sites that were de-

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57 B. Fishman, “After Zarqawi: the dilemmas and future of al Qaeda in Iraq”, *Washington Quarterly* 29, 4 (2006).

58 Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria* (14 November 2014).

secrated and destroyed. Between July and August 2014, the Yazidi community of Sinjar suffered an even crueller fate. In this case, *Da'ish* attacked them with special fury.

Therefore, although the religious radicalism framework can be useful to penetrate and contextualize the essence and vision of groups like the Islamic State, their *modus operandi* and projects proved to be only seemingly explained by religious fervor. Beyond any simplistic comparison, *Da'ish's* approach is not a mere case of replacing secular-ethnic factors with the religious, preserving a nationalistic framework. Rather, it has totally transformed religion and belief in secular political tools, ethicizing them as categories used to impose a new homogeneous and monolithic notion of should-be “nation” and “state” within which whoever is entitled to live is not simply a Muslim but a citizen of *Da'ish's* “*demos*”. In doing so, nationalization and sectarianization totally overlap, providing a tragic testimony to how diversity could again be instrumentally reified and employed to pursue specific political projects.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In today's Middle East, Christians perceive their suffering and peril as the result of systematic persecution that is existentially threatening their survival. Whether this condition is a simple spillover from a wider turbulence or is the result of an intended act of negation of their distinctive identities, the root of this psychology needs to be understood, recounted and known.

Nevertheless, it should not be ignored that their condition symbolizes and epitomizes a far more radical crisis that involves the region and its inhabitants beyond religious or ethnic factors.

This analysis has sought exactly to provide some elements for reconsidering the historical trajectory that has incrementally projected today's Middle East into the present turbulent showdown. Beyond simplistic parallels and comparisons, the relationship between diversity and politics has been analyzed according to the perspective of the modern nation-state and the development of distinct nationalistic projects. It is exactly within these fields that the battle for Middle Eastern diversity is being waged. Although considered defunct, nationalism is still far from being overcome as the principle metric defining today

politics and it remains, with its promises of uniformity and homogenization, the parameter for seeking power and therefore control of the state. In this framework, sectarianization and religious radicalism should be considered products and consequences of nationalism instead of a revival of perennially pre-modern and sub-national identities.

They are also new and narrow reconfigurations that confirm its promises and ambition, instead overcoming and denouncing them. This condition structurally questions the role and presence of diversity, whether religious, ethnic or cultural, in terms of politics and state, making it a political fact and inevitably a potential tool and resource to impose rule and control.

# Women in post-islamic Iran. Contrasting State violence through Islamic feminism and social change

*Sara Hejazi*

## 1. Building a modern nation-state. How Iranian women became “Women”

As Michel Foucault would state in his *History of Sexuality*<sup>1</sup>, the Nineteenth century has been the age of bio-power and top down political control over people; beyond technological innovation and industrialization, bio-power was displayed through cultural means such as human classification, medicalization, designation of “unnatural behaviors” and establishment of a scientific language and terminology. In other words, power and knowledge melted together to construct a modern nation that would in the Twentieth century be so strong and appealing to its people, they would be ready to fight and die in the name of it. Bio-power connected to a specific aim: that of overcoming religious sense of belonging and replacing it with a national one. As B. Anderson has argued, nations were born out of a new broad sense of shared synchronic actions of *imagined communities*.<sup>2</sup>

Going back to gender issues, no modern nation could be constructed without the attribution of specific gender roles to its citizens, based on emerging scientific knowledge and industrial progress and on the net and binary distinction between “men” and “women”. Gendered nature or gender natures were defined and divulged: hysteria was described as a disease affecting women, and especially *certain types of women*;<sup>3</sup> sexual deviance was unfolded, observed, recorded and cured through medicine, psychology or intervention on genitalia. Deviance comprised any non-heterosexual, non-reproductive, non-genital human sexual activity. Out of the negative models based on sexual deviance, or on “typically feminine” characters, mod-

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1 M. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité. La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), vol. I.; R. Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

2 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the origins and spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

3 S. Arnaud, *On hysteria. The invention of a medical category, between 1670 and 1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

ern citizens would imagine their national models as essentially masculine. The Victorian era was thus paving the way to the ideal construction of modern nation states, made of a universal omni-comprehensive *white, urban, middle class man*. As industrialization and progress regulated by bio-power seemed the winning features of the process of civilization undertaken by the West, colonial western nations and citizenships were observed, imitated, longed for in non western parts of the world, i.e. in Iran.

During the Nineteenth Century, under Qajar rule, Iran was economically backward, politically chaotic, and predominantly Shi'ia. It was a patriarchal, fragmented society whose rich material resources were mainly exploited by industrial Europe.<sup>4</sup> Qajar kings' main intention was that of balancing their own local power with economic concessions to French, English and Russians, thus maintaining the status quo. At a cultural level, however, the Qajars were the most *mimetic* dynasty Iran has had until then. Being legitimized by external forces, Qajars began a process of cultural *mimesis* as "a desire to be the other",<sup>5</sup> i.e. the European, and which included redesigning gender roles and re-styling gender imagery with the aim to modernize the nation. In early Qajar art, for instance, beauty was not distinguished by gender: androgenic young men (*amrad*) and women (*houris*) would both represent sexual attractiveness for male adults. However, constant cultural contact between Iran and Europe progressively questioned non-heterosexual local tradition. If Persian ancient poetry (or the miniature art) would traditionally celebrate homo-erotic relations between male adults and *amrads*, the Nineteenth century represented the progressive hiding or cancellation of homoerotic tradition. Why were the Qajars eager to change Iran's traditional sexual outlook? As Iranian scholar Afsaneh Najmabadi pointed out,<sup>6</sup> homo-eroticism and same-sex practices came to mark Iran as backward in the eyes of the Europeans; adult man-*amrad* love and sexual practices prevalent in Iran were considered vices in the West. Hetero-normalization of Eros

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4 H. Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran. The eclipse of the Qajars and the emergence of the Pahlavis* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

5 R. Girard, *Mimesis & Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism, 1953-2005* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

6 A. Najmabadi, *Women with mustaches and men without beard. Gender and sexual anxieties of iranian modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).



and sex which was a process Europe underwent a century before became the “universal” condition of “achieving modernity,” a project that called for hetero-socialization of public space and a reconfiguration of gender roles in industrial societies. By the end of the Nineteenth Century, a highly gender-differentiated portrayal of beauty emerged, along with a concept of love that assumed heterosexuality as “natural”. In that time, Iranians became acutely aware of “another gaze” that entered the scene of sexual desire. This gaze came from outside national borders and had not only a different cultural belonging: it had a *superior* therefore *crucial* cultural belonging. It represented cultural truth. Iranian men interacting with Europeans in Iran or abroad became highly sensitized to the idea that their sexual desire was now under European scrutiny. Homoerotic desire had to be covered. One marker of modernity became the transformation of homo-eroticism into masqueraded heterosexuality. Not only turning beauty into a hetero-normalized object was the accomplishment of Nineteenth Century Iran under Qajar rule, but also questioning traditional gender roles became main stream. Cultural backwardness in the face of European modernity was also attributed to female segregation, that is to the separation of the sexes in the public sphere.

Iranian men began to imagine alternative or innovative gender relations and sexual orientations: if only Iranian women were more like European ones, then gender relations and sexualities could be re-configured.<sup>7</sup> Iranian women's absolute absence from the public scene was thus considered both the reason and the effect of homo-erotic traditional relations, the unmistakable sign of cultural backwardness. To achieve modernity meant to get women out of the private, which meant, in turn, to question women's public appearance: the veil. The Nineteenth century marked the beginning of the “question of the veil” in Iran. Iranian writers, intellectuals, businessmen and travellers abroad started to tackle the issue as a by product of questioning the cultural legitimization of European dominance in the country. Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani (1853-1896/97) was an Iranian intellectual reformer, who advocated for political, social, and religious reform, which were

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7 M. Tavakoli-Targhi, “Imagining Western Women: Occidentalism and Euro-eroticism”, *Radical America*, 24, n. 3 (1993), pp. 73-87.

typical of the century's thinkers. Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani would argue that:

Men are naturally inclined toward socializing with and enjoying the companionship of women. This is so strongly evident that it needs no explication and proof. If a people is forbidden from this great blessing and is deprived of this great deliverance, then inevitably the problem of sexual acts with boys and young male slaves [bachchah'bazi and ghulam'baragi] is created, because boys without facial hair [pisan-i sadah] resemble women and this is one of the errors of nature. It is for this reason that in the Iranian people/nation this grave condition has reached saturation. "You lust after men instead of women" can be witnessed in Iran. And the ground for this situation is the veiling of women that has become established in Iran. Since men's natural desire to see women is frustrated and they are deprived of that blessing, of necessity and inevitably, they turn to pederasty [bachchah'bazi] and making love with boys. Sa'di of Shiraz and the obscene and shameful Qa'ani and other Iranian poets have big collections of poetry that prove my word and relieve me of further explication.<sup>8</sup>

Keeping the sexes separated and preserving women from male contact through *hejab*, *tents*, *chadors*, and so on enhanced homosexuality and cultural backwardness.

Iraj Mirza (1874-1926), one of the most celebrated poets in Iran, expressed this issue into the well known verses:

Until our tribe is tied up in veil, this very queerness is bound to prevail. The draping of the girl with her throat divine Will make the little boy our concubine.<sup>9</sup>

Where "the draping of the girl" is the chador, or the coverage of women, which makes them un-accessible and unpleasant, pushing adult males towards young boys instead. European scrutiny — or the idea of being scrutinized by Europeans — gave birth to a series of cultural questions that accompanied Iranian thinkers from that moment on and which are partly unresolved today. In the first place, what were the plausible gender models for a modern nation?

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8 Najmabadi, *Women with mustaches and men without beard*, p. 56.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

Was it legitimate to look at *farhangi* (foreigner) models, even if the problem emerged by the constant contact with *farhangis* themselves? Were Iranian women supposed to stop veiling? Was unveiling a sign of modernity? Was Iranian heritage totally at stake in the cultural encounter with the West? Some of these questions took Iran right through the Constitutional Revolution at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911 represented a turning point in national history.

Civil rights movements highlighted women's issues and the very first feminist ideas spread during this socially fertile period of time. Through the net definition of gender and gender roles of the Qajar period, Iranian women became self-conscious. This process of self-consciousness implied that there was a public women's issue (*masaley-e zan*) to confront with, and the very first attempt of confrontation occurred in the years during the riots. More and more women became aware and capable of using specific language and terms in the foucaultian way, to designate women's issue and to display visions of the future driven by the innovative idea of "improvement" of women's condition.

For the first time, despite social and economic differences, belonging to female gender meant imagining a common ground or a common life-experience based on sexuality, which could justify common, political action. Imagination played a pivotal role in the mobilization: just like people were "imagining nations", they could imagine "gender". Women's participation to women's issues was a top down process at the beginning. Princess Taj Saltaneh -Qajar Naser al-Din Shah's daughter- was one of the first advocate for women's social improvements. However, later, some of these elitarian ideas spread to the emerging middle class and were part —together with nationalistic ideas— of the public discourse of the Constitutional Revolution.

Women were active in organizing street riots, participate in some fights, join underground activities against foreign forces, and raise funds for the establishment of the National Bank.

In the course of this national struggle, some enlightened women realized the potential of women for organized political activities and used the momentum provided by the revolution as a venue for bring-

ing women's causes into the open.<sup>10</sup> Women's first secret societies (*anjomans*) were created, such as *Anjomane Azadi-ye Zanan* (the Women's Freedom Society) and *Anjomane-e Zanan-e Neqabpush* (the Society of Masked Women). The main topic discussed in the gatherings was women's right to vote, parallel to what was happening in the West, however this right was not achieved until 1963 under Shah Pahlavi's Reign. Women's next attempt was to file a petition and ask the *Majles*<sup>11</sup> to officially recognize their *anjomans*. In 1908, they submitted their request to the Parliament, but their action created an uproar. A number of conservative *ulama* and wealthy merchants declared women's *anjomans* “anti-Islamic” and “heretical.”

While Iranian society was deeply changing in its economic asset, from a rural to an industrial society, religion served as a conservative reminder that the very last taboo of change from tradition to modernity was public gender hierarchy. Supporting women, a few liberals argued that women's organizations had existed throughout Islamic history and could not be considered un-Islamic. This position represented the innovative possibility for a different approach to Islamic history, which, years later, would express itself as the Islamic feminist perspective. Constant cultural comparison with the West, the adoption from the West of a public discourse on women, the adaptation of this general discourse to local specificities, such as the issue of the veil, the shift from a more flexible, ambiguous sexual imagery, to a more definite and heterosexual one, were the highlights of these two centuries. Through this process, women became women and women's issues became a public domain, adopting a specific terminology and self-consciousness. This social and cultural transformation from the Qajar era to the Constitutional Revolution<sup>12</sup> gave grounds to the raise of the “Islamic woman” as a political and ideological feminist model for the decades to come.

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10 M. Mohammadi, “Iranian Women and the Civil Rights Movement in Iran: Feminism Interacted”, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9, 1 (2007), pp. 1-21.

11 Iranian parliament established after the constitutional revolution in 1906-1911.

12 J. Afary, *The Iranian constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911. Grassroots of Democracy, Social democracy and the Origins of feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

## **2. Soldiers of purity. How Fatima became Fatima**

The historical events related with the Pahlavi dynasty, from 1925 to 1979, pushed the process of cultural modernization and its impact on Iranian women to a dramatic extent. If during the Qajar era top-down imposition of gender definition was limited to élites and artistic or symbolic representations, by the end of the Pahlavi dynasty cultural ideals on gender became top-down political actions involving all social classes. In 1936, Reza Shah had as his greatest ambition that of transforming Iran into a modern western-like state. He realized soon that infrastructures, railways, state schools, police, the army, etc. were not enough to serve for his purpose. There was another, perhaps more important level on which to operate and make real changes: the cultural one. To his opinion, Iranian people were supposed to adopt a “modern way of being”: i.e. dressing the European way- with hats and coats for men- and stop wearing the veil for women. Reza Shah did not “come out of the blue” all of a sudden; as said earlier, discussions on veiling and unveiling started before the Constitutional Revolution and were divulged through the first printed women's journals in the years before World War I.

One of these journals was *zaban-e-zanan* (the language of women) started by the first Iranian feminist of modern history: Sadigheh Dowlatabadi (1884-1962). Dowlatabadi was the daughter of a renowned *ulama* who hired tutors to educate her at home, since there were no schools for girls at that time. After studying in France, she was hired by Reza Shah to work in the ministry of education and stopped wearing the veil in public already nine years before the Shah's ban on the veil, being the only woman in Tehran walking on the streets with a simple hat. Mrs. Dowlatabadi anticipated historical events: state unveiling was carried out on January 7, 1936 through the intervention of the police against women in the streets. On the same day, the Shah would celebrate the end of Iranian backwardness or “the day of the emancipation of women” in a ceremony in which women guests participated with their heads uncovered.

If the Shah's state actions and repressive politics had largely destroyed the incipient Iranian feminism of the years of the Constitutional Revolution on one side, on the other side the monarch worked to replace independent women's movement with “state feminism”, to

which actions of forced unveiling were strongly related. State feminism was carried out through the *Kanun-e Banovan* (Ladies Center) organ, composed primarily of privileged women of the élites. This was an organ of cultural promotion of new western values for Iranian women and which was —in turn— controlled directly by the Shah. Meanwhile, the Shah opened some modern sectors of the economy for women, offering jobs as teachers with the task to form new aware citizens of the modern nation state; one of the main concepts related to women's public presence in those years was that of *vatan* (homeland). Women became responsible of transmitting to their children state loyalty and love for homeland, which was supposed to be superior to the more traditional love for religion. Public and non-sex segregated schools were established, family laws were modified, but families were still suspicious in sending their daughters in promiscuous schools. The concept of *namus* (honor) was still strongly related to women's sexual behaviour, while that of *vatan* (the homeland) could not replace its importance. Forced emancipation of women was not only a reflection of modernization and state-building, it was also an attempt to disempower the clerics whose social, cultural and political power on women and gender relations was still very strong.

Through the *kanun-e-banovan*, the king stripped much of clerical power from controlling women's labour and sexuality. Clerics would in fact play a pivotal role in everyday life of Iranian women, giving advices on crucial matters such as family relations, sexual behaviour, work-life balance etc.

As Hamideh Sedeghi argues:

By so doing, his [the Shah's] Westernization schemes came full circle: women's emancipation meant state exploitation of gender as a measure to combat and contain religious forces and their bazaar supporters. The emancipation of women as a public policy instrument provided the state with a new form of power: the ability to use gender to emasculate religious authorities and transfer patriarchal power from the domain of the clergy to the realm of the state, and further, to utilize gender to accomplish its Europeanization policies. This was

manifested in the gradual entrance of women to the labor force and educational spheres.<sup>13</sup>

This revolutionary aspect of opening the labour market to women was implemented during Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign (1941-1979). In 1960's the nation was integrated in the world market and pursuing an economic growth based on rising oil revenues; this generated a mass migration from the rural to the urban areas and a growing need for women workers in the industry. As it happened in the West, the shift from a rural to an industrial economy was accompanied by the reset of gender relations. Anthropologist Marvin Harris<sup>14</sup> explained why urbanization brought about fewer children in American families and more women going off to work, in a time when the labour market had a growing need of under-paid and more flexible workers, roles filled by women.

Cities were not only offering under-paid labour to rural women: they also represented an opportunity for cultural encounter and circulation of ideas that had a political impact. During the 1960s and 1970s, more women became literate in Iran and sensitive to the political ideologies which were secretly spreading in urban milieus. On the one hand, new life styles and possibilities of consumerism of market goods opened up to certain social classes, like the emerging middle class; on the other hand, social mobility was practically non-existent and the perceived modernization of the country did not apply to real life. Discontent was common, while political control displayed through cruel torturing practices of the Shah's police- the Savak. Right before the 1979 revolution, people had the perception that walls had "eyes and ears",<sup>15</sup> and that Iran was an unofficial colony of the West. In the two decades prior to the revolution, a political ideology emerged and spread illegally through society, having at its core

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13 H. Sadeghi, *Women and politics in Iran. Veiling, unveiling and reveiling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 91.

14 M. Harris, *America now. The anthropology of a changing culture* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1981).

15 S. A. Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown. The Islamic revolution in Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); see also P. Avery, G. Hambly, Ch. Melville (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), vol. 7.

concept the idea of “purity”, which comprised cultural, political, economic, religious purity and which was deeply rooted in Shi'a Islam. At its center, there was the issue of sexuality and women. As we have argued earlier, the modernization of Iranian nation was deeply involved with a top-down redefinition of sexuality and gender roles. Again, the Pahlavi dynasty had as its main action that of radical change of sexual relations in order to fit new economic and political assets and needs.

This top-down reassessment of gender and sexualities generated an important counter ideology that clang to religion in an innovative way. Religion became a cultural framework, which was at once domestic, familiar, innovative and future-oriented. Not Islam in general, but Shi'a Islam, could include cultural authenticity against external domination, political utopia and the promise of social justice against the tyranny of the Shah, all in one. Shi'ism served as a *weltanschauung* to coherently interpret contemporary reality through familiar categories such as that of martyrdom and suffering for a greater cause. Most of all, this religious ideology provided a new female model in a time when traditional gender roles were deeply questioned. The ideal of purity was in fact in the hands of women.

Being women's bodies the center of political and cultural discourse of Iran's paths to modernity, the concept of purity emerged to contain all recent changes society went through in a familiar cultural framework with a revolutionary intent: that of overthrowing the monarchy and keeping the nation together. Ali Shariati, one of the most important theorist of Shi'a Islam as a mean for social justice, wrote in 1971:<sup>16</sup> In the midst of this disruptive thought which has been imposed upon us and will continue to impose itself upon us, what can we do? Who is that who can take up the mandate? The one who has do something and in saving us play an active role, is not the traditional woman who is asleep in her quiet, tame, ancient mould, nor is the new woman who is a modern doll that has assumed the mould of enemy and in the process has become full and saturated. Rather, one who can choose the new human characteristics, who can break the fastenings of

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16 A. Shariati, *Fatemeh is Fatemeh* (Teheran: The Shariati Foundation, 1971); for works on Ali Shariati see E. Abrahamian, *Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution*, in E. Burke, I. Lapidus (eds.), *Islam, Politics, and Social Movements* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); A. Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian. A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998).



old traditions which were presented in the name of religion, but in fact were national and tribal traditions ruling over the spirit (p. 149).

In his works, A. Shariati — who studied with academic Orientalist as L. Massignon in Paris, and was influenced by western philosophy such as that of Herbert Marcuse and the school of Frankfurt— reinterpreted the local knowledge of Shi'a religion through political and revolutionary lens. His idea was that Iran suffered not only of *Westoxication*<sup>17</sup> but also of a blind “westernism”, that was a reduction of the West to a simple and poor stereotype. In *Fatemeh is Fatemeh*, he asks why in Iran everybody knows about Jaqueline Kennedy and top model Twiggy, but nothing is known about excellent female scientists, such as Marie Curie, M. me de La Vida and other female scholars who, from the West, contributed to science and knowledge even on Islam and Iranian history and archaeology. The new Shi'a female model was supposed to be inspired by these western women, the “authentic” feminists, Shariati argued.

In a way, these remarkable western women, were the different expressions of *Fatemeh*. Fatemeh the daughter of the prophet, was not only a saint, but was most of all a woman with full intellectual capabilities and broad academic knowledge. She was, therefore, transnational, global, pure, essential: she could be born anywhere, in the East, in the West; she could be any woman, but not any woman could be Fatemeh. Only those capable of critical thinking on contemporary world could be Fatemeh. Shari'ati constructed a version of Shi'ism and Shi'a women that focused on its utopian and insurrectionary qualities. Positive and negative models of women were progressively and publicly discussed during the years prior to the revolution, based on the writings of Ali Shariati, combined with western feminist literature.

No anti-imperialist discourse, nor liberation ideology was disjunct from the search of a righteous representation of women and women's bodies. Imperialism was incarnated by the image of westernized women in their miniskirts smoking cigarettes on the streets of Teheran. Anti-imperialism was incarnated by veiled women studying at the university and praying in the Mosque. Exalting Fatemeh, the Prophet's daughter and the wife of his successor, Emam Ali, meant to

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17 J. Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague From the West* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984).

create a convincing and modern model of the real Muslim woman. This remained one of the core concepts of political Islam in Iran. Still today, after almost forty years from the revolution, Fatemeh's birthday is celebrated as the *Woman's Day*. She is commemorated as the paragon of motherhood and wifely virtues, above all, a heroine who was an authentic and devout Muslim, devoid of anything impure, foreign, and alien to Islam.

Shi'a Islam played as an ideological framework that provided some unifying concepts which influenced women's life experience to a point that social mobilization could be reached.<sup>18</sup>

The 1979 Revolution introduced a new chapter into women's history. It represented veiled women as powerful revolutionaries, and it devalued secular women as Westernized, monarchical (*Taquti*), and indecent. This had strong effects in society: where social positions and jobs were opened for religious revolutionary women, secularized women were progressively excluded from their previous workplace, as Nobel prize lawyer Shirin Ebadi pointed out.<sup>19</sup>

It became more evident that the meaning of women's sexuality, be it publicly displayed or disguised, assumed prominence for the state and soon became the inner and outer expression of the Islamic Republic's identity. From outside Iranian borders, the black chador became the symbol of Khomeini's revolution; from the inside, it represented the defeat of a certain part of the country's population and the victory of another. From the early twentieth-century on, controlling women's sexuality remained at the core of the power struggle between rival groups of the revolution and the clerical establishment.<sup>20</sup> At its inception, the revolution brought up an ideal woman who was a pious Muslim and a militant fighter; for some aspects, she resembled the pre-Qajar *hour*i (virgin) which was androgenic. She was masculinized, desexualized or de-womenized. Her black chador would entitle her to carry out in the public sphere many tasks precluded to women in the past. *Vatan* (homeland) and purity were her basic ideals, and the sacrifice of her own life was contemplated for the sake of *namus* (honour),

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18 D. Kandyoti, *Women, Islam and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

19 S. Ebadi, *Il mio Iran* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer, 2006).

20 Sadeghi, *Women and politics in Iran*, p. 135.

which wasn't just a personal, family *namus* as in the past, but that of the entire nation. Nine years of Iran-Iraqi war contributed to empower this revolutionary female ideal model of cultural resistance, Shi'a militance and spirit of sacrifice. This is the overall cultural scenario of the raise of contemporary Iranian Islamic feminism.

### **3. Changing the “fiqh”. The Islamic Republic becomes post-modern**

Iranian Islamic feminism was not only a national phenomenon, given that in other parts of the Middle East, women were gaining access to education and to the job market as well: this general situation marked the birth of a broad, “global” Islamic feminism in the frame of political Islam.<sup>21</sup> The emergence of Islamic feminism coincided also with the spread of a new form of information technology.<sup>22</sup>

In pure discussion of secular and Islamic feminism, scholar M. Badran historicized the terms “religious” and “secular”, pointing out that “secular” feminism arose in a largely “religious era”, while Islamic feminism surfaced in a “secular era”. This meant that secular feminism emerged in a context in which religion, state, and society were highly enmeshed, while Islamic feminism appeared at a moment when the notion of secular state and society had taken hold. Electronic technology circulated information and ideas freely and rapidly through cyberspace, creating an unprecedented simultaneity of local and global production. Moreover, the era of mass migrations from Muslim countries to the West enhanced cultural mimesis, hybridation, confrontation and constant redefinition of gender models, more massively than in colonial era. There are multiple points from which feminisms radiated outward. The West has not been the only patrimonial home of feminisms from which all feminisms derived and, most of all, against which they must always be measured.

However, as said earlier in this paper, a specific language defining women's issues was born in the West during the Victorian era.

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21 L. Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

22 M. Badran, “Between Secular And Islamic Feminism/s. Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond”, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 1, 1 (2005), pp. 6-28.

This some way represented the input for a specific and local discourse on women's issues, which spread in non-western societies as well, once the ideal economic and social conditions were achieved: urbanization, circulation of ideas, printing of dedicated journals, cultural encounters, introduction of technological innovation.

When tackling Islamic feminism, one has to keep in mind the power hierarchy that western and secular feminists entail with Muslim women<sup>23</sup>. Liberating women from religions seemed, from a western perspective, the ground from which any feminist movement should take place. The privatization of religion has been one of the main tenets of feminism, seen as a prerequisite for the development of a feminist consciousness and a movement. However, Islamic feminism stands on the exact opposite side: only religion or its true message can re-dignify the status of women in society.

As J. Casanova would argue<sup>24</sup> the process of de-privatization of religion has become a relatively global trend, while simultaneously other kinds of feminisms did emerge. Secular feminists tried with little success to reform Muslim personal status codes or family law in Iran, but the attempt did not work because it was perceived (and narrated) as a further form of cultural dominance and colonialism.<sup>25</sup> Cultural authenticity was a powerful counter-narrative, which was searched for in familiar or domestic roots and was deeply tied with concepts such as homeland and nationality against "cultural invasion". On the contrary, Islamic feminism provided a new edge for reform, offering new thinking and new tools while looking familiar, making religious discourse its paramount discourse, grounding its assertions in readings of the Qur'an, insisting upon the practice of social justice meanwhile circulating globally with unprecedented speed and with the freedom that cyberspace offers. If Islamic feminism surfaced when Islamism was ascendant in the Middle East, this same Islamic feminism also sprang

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23 N. Tohidi, "Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran", in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Ch. Talpady Mohanty, A. Russo, L. Torres (eds.), (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 251-267.

24 J. Casanova, *Religion, Politics and gender equality. Public Religions revisited Program paper*, UNRISD Comparative Research Project on Religion, Politics, and Gender Equality, April 2009, Open docs.

25 M. Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

from fertile home soil of a well-established tradition of Middle Eastern secular feminism, even if there was a substantial difference between the first and the second type of women's movement.

Middle Eastern secular feminism was mostly made up of middle-upper class women, a very small percentage of the society. Islamic feminism, on the contrary, was transversal to different social classes, but its large basis was made up of women of middle-lower classes, whose education was recent and an innovative item to their families. This is the main reason why in Iran, Islamic feminism did not dismiss the Islamic Republic but critiqued it and demanded a different reading of religion: Islamic feminists were the representatives of the social classes directly involved in the revolution and supporting the clergy. They were those, that is, who overthrew the Shah. While women were, in the aftermath of the revolution, massively pushed in the public sphere and in the education system, gender-based social inequalities were at the core of the Islamic State in the name of the post-revolutionary re-instatement of *Shar'ia* Law.

Tapping into popular demands for social justice, the 'Return to Shari'a' led to regressive gender policies, with devastating consequences for women: compulsory dress codes, gender segregation, and the revival of cruel punishments and outdated patriarchal and tribal models of social relations.<sup>26</sup>

The years of Iran-Iraqi war were so hard and centered on more imminent emergencies, that real battles to reform *Shar'ia* were not undertaken by Islamic feminists. However, those were the years of great social change: during the war, all Iranian men were mobilized and this created some employment opportunities for educated women in the public sector, particularly in health, education, and (to a lesser extent) public administration.<sup>27</sup> It was only by the end of the war with Iraq in 1988 and the period of reconstruction from 1989 to 1997 that an opportunity for the demands of the emergent civil society arrived. By the

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26 Z. Mir Hoseini, "Beyond 'Islam' vs. 'Feminism'", *IDS Bulletin*, 42, 1 (2011), pp. 67-77; "Women and Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran: Divorce, Veiling and Emerging Feminist Voices", in H. Afshar (ed.), *Women and Politics in the Third World* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 149-169.

27 V. Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate' Signs", *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 27, 4 (2002), pp. 1153-1171.

start of the 90's it was becoming increasingly apparent that women were re/visioning a new feminism through their fresh readings of the Qur'an. Following the war, the government reversed its opposition to family planning and embarked on a vigorous campaign to stabilize population growth through the widespread distribution of contraceptives to married women. The modern iranian family ideal was already changing under the scrutiny of modernity and urban life, where numerous family were depicted as "outdated" even by the clergy.

So the objective conditions for Islamic feminism to consolidate was the opening of public jobs on one side, and the top-down family planning through the promotion of contraceptive and a small family ideal on the other.

In the 1990's a combination of a number of factors served to undermine several of the most egregious policies of the Islamic Republic and reverse its program on women, family, and gender relations. The changes occurred after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini,<sup>28</sup> during the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and in the context of a program for economic liberalization, integration into the global economy and the establishment of capitalist society. Under Rafsanjani's presidency (1989-1997), Iran was vehemently pushed toward the global economy, but its legal and cultural asset was framed by state religion; this created what philosopher Daryush Shayegan called *cultural schizophrenia*,<sup>29</sup> a constant mental feeling of clash or need to negotiate between different systems of meanings: new promises of capitalism and consumerism on one side, memories of war and hardship, and religion as a political utopia on the other side. Islamic feminism represented a path out of cultural *schizophrenia*, because it made the effort to unify the different complex aspects of a modern Islamic Republic in a globalized world.

From a theological perspective, the basis of islamic feminism was made of a distinction between religion as a system of belief based on sacred texts, and religious knowledge, that is the access to religious sources through human interpretation. The first, religion, was fixed

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28 A. Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995).

29 D. Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West* (London: Saqi Books, 1992).

once it was revealed. The second, interpretation and religious knowledge was always dependent on historical contingencies and human evolution through events.

Abdolkarim Soroush, religious philosopher and thinker argued:

Our understanding of revealed texts is contingent upon the knowledge already set around us; that is to say that forces external to Revelation drag our interpretation and understanding of it in various directions. [...] Believers generally conceive of religion as something holy or sacred, something constant. You cannot talk about change or evolution of religious knowledge. They stick to the idea of fixity. But as I have demonstrated in my work, we have to make a distinction between religion on the one side and religious interpretation on the other. By religion here I mean not faith, which is the subjective part of religion, but the objective side, which is the revealed text. This is constant, whereas our interpretations of that text are subject to evolution. The idea is not that religious texts can be changed but rather over time interpretations will change. We are always immersed in an ocean of interpretations. The text does not speak to you. You have to make it speak by asking questions of it.<sup>30</sup>

*Ijtihad*, the act of religious interpretation is depicted as an always mobile, flexible act, and it can be pursued by any religious expert. The theological grounds for islamic feminism were legitimated through *ijtihad*, even though –as anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hoseini stated Islamic feminism was the “unwanted child” of political Islam:

It did not emerge because the Islamists offered an egalitarian vision of gender relations. They did not. Rather, their agenda of ‘return to the Shari‘a’ and their attempt to translate into policy the patriarchal gender notions inherent in classical jurisprudence, provoked women to increase criticism of these notions and spurred greater activism among secular feminists, who were now internationalised and had the legitimacy of human rights on their side. The Islamists’ defence of patriarchal rulings as ‘God’s Law’ and as promoting an authentic and ‘Islamic’ way of life, brought the classical jurisprudential texts out of the closet. A growing number of women came to question whether

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<sup>30</sup> *Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush*, Q-News International (British Muslim weekly), no. 220-221, 14-27 June 1996.

there was an inherent link between Islamic ideals and patriarchy; they saw no contradiction between their faith and their aspiration for gender equality. Political Islam gave them the language to sustain a critique of the gender biases of Muslim family laws in ways that were previously impossible, which opened a space, an arena, for an internal critique of patriarchal readings of the Shari'a that was unprecedented in Muslim history.<sup>31</sup>

Cultural, economic and social grounds were thus solid for Islamic feminism to spread in Iran and have a broader impact on civil society than what secular feminism did. However, today's movement is strongly different from what it has been during the years of Shariati and in the aftermath of the Revolution.

Gheissari and Nasr<sup>32</sup> argue that by the late 1990s, Iranians placed demands on the political system that the Islamic Republic could not accommodate. The Iranian people changed significantly in the decade leading up to the 1997 elections as immense gains in literacy, women's participation in the economy, and urbanization of population occurred. This, and other factors, account for the voter turnout in 1997 which led to the election of the reformist president Seyed Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005).

Political reformism was directly connected to Iranian Islamic feminism through well-known women who were politicians or directly related to the parliament or simply impacted politics through editorial activities such as Zahra Rahnavard,<sup>33</sup> Shahla Sherkat,<sup>34</sup> Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani,<sup>35</sup> Jamileh Kadivar<sup>36</sup> to name but a few in *Zanan* magazine, intellectuals and experts of religions were asked to com-

31 Mir Hoseini, "Beyond 'Islam' vs. 'Feminism'", p. 72.

32 A. Gheissari, S. R. Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

33 Wife of Mir-Hosein Mousavi, reformist candidate of the 2009 presidential elections and later symbol of the green movement *Rahesabz*.

34 Editor of well known islamic feminist women magazine *Zanan*.

35 Former President's Rafsanjani's daughter, served the iranian parliament from 1996 to 2000.

36 Sister of the well known muslim scholar Mohsen Kadivar, in an interview I had with Ms. Kadivar in 2010, she explained one of the fundamentals of present day iranian islamic feminism: changing the *velayat-e faquih*, the government of the jurist theorized and created by Imam Khomeini, into a *velayat-e-fuquha*, a government of many jurists, including women jurists.



ment and re-interpret some of the misogynist aspects of Shar'ia law, such as the impossibility for women to run for presidency.<sup>37</sup>

In this scenario, big legal changes have emerged in recent years led by Islamic feminists: for instance the old law allowed for girls who have not reached the age of consent, 14 years of age, to be married to a man with the consent of her father. However, the reformed law states that girls under the age of 14 have to receive permission from a civil court before getting married.<sup>38</sup> Other areas in which Islamic feminism and women's movement impacted the law include issues involving *mehr* (bride price), allowing women to work as research judges in universities, indigenous women's NGOs (non-governmental organizations), divorce law, and child custody law.<sup>39</sup>

Although Islamic *shari'a* does not explicitly prevent women from being leaders of prayers, women have not traditionally and officially been able to follow other women in their prayers. The employment of women as leaders of congregation prayers and the head of other women during prayers held at schools constitutes a major development in this sense. Iranian reformists introduce the change in religious practices as a victory for women's movements in Iran where women challenge the traditional male privileges in politics and in the clergy.

Furthermore, it is especially on marriage matters and contracts that women have mobilized.

*Mehr* was traditionally the bride's price, due to the woman in case of divorce or second marriage by her spouse. The demand for *mehr* gave the wife some protection against the inequities of the contract she entered.

Legal disadvantages in wedding conditions were discussed and questioned by women. This led to deep transformation of the *mehr*. Nowadays, *mehr* is due immediately upon marriage, but its payment is deferred at a wife's pleasure.

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37 In 2013 presidential elections, for instance, there were 30 women registered as candidates, but the guardian council ruled out the participation of women.

38 E. Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran", *Feminist Review*, 69 (2001), pp. 42-72.

39 Ibid.

Because *mehr* is a substantial sum, its payment can sometimes be onerous for the husband.

In the last decade, many young men were detained in jail because they could not pay the *mehr* when their wives asked them to. This led to a substantial growing difficulty for young couples to get married, because contract conditions represent a disadvantage, especially for men. In an economic scenario where unemployment rates are high and economic conditions under international sanctions are harsh, young Iranian males cannot afford a *mehr*, nor can they afford to be the full supporters of modern families, even if their wives go off to work.

For the Iranian legal system, in fact, wives are not entitled to contribute to the economic well-being of the family, so if they work outside the home, like many Iranian women do, their earnings can be kept for themselves. Paradoxically therefore, Iranian weddings represent a social and economic advantage for most of the middle-upper class women and a disadvantage for same-class men, while discriminatory marriage traits are still heavy upon rural, traditional women.

Before 1992, divorce could be pursued by men without any previous notice, upon will, and by women only in restricted cases. In the 1992 revision of the law of marriage and divorce, the Majles explicitly reversed post-revolutionary measures. All divorces now required court approval, rather than allowing private divorce by consent with no formal process other than registration with a notary, a form that had always held the possibility for coercion of the wife.

All divorcing couples must now go through a process of arbitration. Courts were directed to withhold divorce certification until the husband paid the wife all that was due her, including the *mehr*. In 1994, the post-revolutionary Special Civil Courts were abolished and family issues, including divorce, support, and child custody arrangements were integrated with other civil matters in a court of unitary jurisdiction.<sup>40</sup>

The Majles mandated that the new courts have exclusive jurisdiction over these family law matters. Every such court was required

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40 L. Halper, "Law And Women's Agency In Post-Revolutionary Iran", *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender*, 28 (2005), pp. 85-142.

to have a woman judge, to counsel the court on these questions, and to weigh in on their resolution.

From a theoretical perspective, Islamic feminism has now integrated post-modern ideas drawing upon secular discourses and methodologies to strengthen and extend its claims. Islamic feminists use a postmodern discussion of language and power. Multiple truths, multiple roles and multiple realities are part of postmodern feminist's focus. Moreover, its discourse is extended not only to secular women but also to clerical scholars<sup>41</sup> In the Masjed Jameh of Isfahan (Friday Mosque), since 2016 a team of young Mullahs sit in the *madrasa*'s courtyard are available for foreigners, women and any other believer to answer theological questions<sup>42</sup> in a simple matter.

Most of these mullahs speak English, so they discuss about religion with both westerners and locals. In one meeting, a young Iranian woman, surrounded by a group of German tourists asked about the issue of music. "Why can't a woman sing in public?" The mullah explained that music is not prohibited in Islam, as long as it does not enhance the "loss of control".

"How can we measure this loss?" asked the woman.

"It depends on our personal critical thinking." Answered the mullah referring to *ijtihad* and leaving thus a free interpretation of the matter.

Formally, women cannot sing in public in Iran, but still, they do sing at parties and private concerts and public ones as long as it is only for female audience. The issue of women playing music in the context of political, religious, and cultural constraints, highlights the agency of female musicians and vocal performers as women's struggles for self-expression and voicing their presence in public spaces on the national stage. There are many young girls taking music classes all over Iran and the Internet sets stages for them that overcome the prohibition of exhibition in the public sphere.

Not only Islamic feminism is changing society, of course, but the substantial demographical changes in contemporary Iran are framed by an Islamic ideal of modern woman. Today, 70% of Iranian

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41 F. Ahmadi, "Islamic feminism in Iran. Feminism in a new Islamic context", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 22, 2 (2006), pp. 33-53.

42 Personal observation, December 2017, Esfahan, *Meydan Imam, Masjed Jameh*.

population is urban; the literacy rate for girls aged six and over is 82%; the average number of children per woman is two; and the number of female students in institutes of higher education is two million, or 62% of the student population. Girls' massive access to instruction in post-revolutionary Iran has led to a rise in the average age of first marriage for women (now 23) and has also increased the proportion of marriages that are based on the free choice of one's spouse.<sup>43</sup> Individualism and western life-styles are common in urban areas, an aspects which has a crucial impact on marriage and family patterns. Islam, state religion, resists as a cultural frontier that women consider in their everyday negotiation with the state, patriarchal system and modern transformations. Being an Islamic feminist doesn't necessarily mean to have a strong ideology today: rather, it looks like being Muslim and extremely modern is a perfect combination for women to survive in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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43 M. Poya, *Women, Work and Islamism: Ideology and Resistance in Iran*, (London: Zed books, 2005); M. Maghazei, "Voicing their presence: Postrevolution Iranian female vocalists in context", *The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 15 (2017), pp. 233-247.

# **An ecological perspective for understanding radicalization processes. Insights from the French case**

*Giulia Mezzetti, Fabio Introini*

## **1. A French exceptionalism?**

In the most recent analyses of the contemporary developments of jihadism, scholars and researchers have shown a specific interest in the case of France and of Francophone countries, which came under particular scrutiny due to the string of both large- and small-scale jihadist attacks that hit them since 2012.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, France has suffered the deadliest episodes of jihadist terrorism between 2015 and 2016. Moreover, France is the European country that has witnessed the highest number (in absolute terms) of young people leaving for Syria to become *foreign fighters*: according to the estimates of the Soufan Group,<sup>2</sup> approximately 1.700 people have left France to become “foreign fighters” in the so-called Islamic State. The figures appear all the more striking in the case of Belgium: with its roughly 500 foreign fighters, it is one of the countries with the highest ratio of jihadists, relative to population. If we take into account the data concerning foreign fighters' countries of origin, it is possible to notice that Tunisia has represented thus far the first “supplier” of manpower to Daesh,

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1 By killing three children, a Rabbi and three soldiers in Toulouse and Montauban (11-22 March 2012), Mohammed Merah “inaugurated” a “new wave” of jihadist attacks targeting Western countries. With reference to France and Belgium, his murders were followed by the assault at the Jewish Museum in Brussels (24 May 2014), the massacre in the Parisian satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and the taking of hostages in a kosher supermarket in Paris (7-9 January 2015), the assault near a gas production plant near Lyon, with the macabre decapitation of a victim (26 June 2015), the failed attack on a Thalys train connecting Amsterdam to Paris (21 August 2015), the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015, the suicide bombing at the Brussels Zaventem airport (22 March 2016), the stabbing of a police officer and of his wife in Magnanville (13 June 2016), the attack carried out on the *Promenade des Anglais* in Nice (14 July 2016), the knife killing of a priest who was celebrating the Mass in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray (26 July 2016), the machete assault on two policewomen in Charleroi, Belgium (6 August 2016), the stabbing of three police officers in Brussels (5 October 2016), the attack on the Champs-Élysées (20 April 2017), the stabbing of two girls in Marseille (29 September 2017). This list could be much longer, if it was not for the numerous foiled and failed attacks, both in France and Belgium.

2 The Soufan Group, Foreign Fighters. An updated assessment of the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq, 2015.

with 6.000 Tunisian nationals (7.000 according to non-official counts) having become soldiers of the “Caliphate”. Tunisia, too, recently experienced jihadist attacks<sup>3</sup> on its soil. Morocco and Lebanon as well rank among the top providers of foreign fighters: between 1.200 and 1.500 Moroccans and roughly 900 Lebanese nationals are presumed to have joined Daesh.<sup>4</sup>

This picture might suggest that Francophone countries-France and some of its former colonies, as well as Belgium-are specifically concerned by jihadism, more than other countries. In their study of global jihadism, McCants and Meserole<sup>5</sup> compare figures on foreign fighters' countries of origin and, for each country, calculate its foreign fighters as a percentage of its overall Muslim population. By asking the question “how many foreign fighters per Muslim resident originate from a given country?”, they find that the “top predictor” of jihadist radicalization is whether the country has-or had-French as a national language. Thus, they discover, for instance, that “per Muslim resident Belgium produces far more foreign fighters than either the United Kingdom or Saudi Arabia”.<sup>6</sup> Of course, they do not consider language per se as a driver of radicalization; rather, they suppose that it represents a proxy of what they call the “French political culture”. In other words, in their view France and other countries that undergo its influence are affected by jihadist radicalization more than other nations, due to some features that are peculiar the French social, cultural and political landscape –specifically and most importantly, its treatment of its Muslim minority and its view of secularism and religion. Furthermore, they identify strong correlations between this “Francophone effect”, the rate of youth unemployment and the level of urbanization of a country: according to their model, there would be more

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3 The Bardo National Museum attack, in Tunisi (18 March 2015) and the mass shooting occurred at a tourist resort close to the city of Sousse (26 June 2015).

4 In absolute terms, the five top foreign fighters nationalities are the Tunisian (6.000-7.000), the Saudi Arabian (2.500), the Russian (2.400), the Turkish (2.000-2.200) and the Jordanian (2.000) ones, according to The Soufan Group's estimates (The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters. An updated assessment of the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq*, 2015).

5 W. McCants, Ch. Meserole, “The French connection. Explaining Sunni militancy around the world”, *Foreign Affairs*, 24 March 2016.

6 W. McCants, Ch. Meserole, “The French connection. Explaining Sunni militancy around the world”, *Foreign Affairs*, 24 March 2016.

probabilities of embracing jihadism when these three variables are considered together. In sum, they argue that large numbers of unemployed youths, living in large cities, appear more exposed or prone to the lure of radical ideas—especially when these cities are in Franco-phone countries, which espouse an approach to secularism that is more aggressive than anywhere else:

there's broad anecdotal support for this idea—consider the rampant radicalization in Molenbeek, in the Paris *banlieues*, in Ben Gardane. Each of these contexts have produced a massively disproportionate share of foreign fighters, and each are also urban pockets with high youth unemployment.<sup>7</sup>

This thesis sparked a heated debate and was harshly criticized.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is true that it may sound quite vague or simplistic. For instance, in McCants and Meserole's view, “French political culture” is to be blamed, but they do not define exactly what this political culture would consist in and, according to one critic, this would actually be impossible because such a homogeneous political culture does not simply exist, given “the diversity of the Francophone world”.<sup>9</sup> It would be as hard as defining an “English political culture that would encompass, say, the United States, the Palau Islands, and Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe”.<sup>10</sup> For sure, what can be stated about France does not necessarily apply to Tunisia or Morocco (especially concerning religion in the public sphere) —and even Belgium differs from France in a number of aspects.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it fails to explain other

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7 W. McCants, Ch. Meserole, “The French connection. Explaining Sunni militancy around the world”, *Foreign Affairs*, 24 March 2016.

8 It must be highlighted anyway that theirs was a first, tentative presentation of their results, which they had obtained from a still on-going analysis (at least at the time), which appeared in a short article published on the magazine “Foreign Affairs” and not a peer reviewed journal. See the corresponding reference in the “References” section.

9 O. Decottignies, “The French disconnection. Francophone countries and radicalization”, *Foreign Affairs*, 12 April 2016.

10 O. Decottignies, “The French disconnection. Francophone countries and radicalization”, *Foreign Affairs*, 12 April 2016.

11 Even if, according to Kepel & Rougier, “North African jihadism is permeated with a specific anti-French dimension. In this context, the French language is seen as the conveyor of the religious skepticism of Voltaire and the secularism

noteworthy features of contemporary jihadism, i.e. the remarkable and conspicuous presence, in the ranks of ISIS and similar groups, of both converts to Islam and individuals who are educated and/or that do not come from poor marginalized areas.

Nevertheless, however reductive, their argument raised the issue of what appears as an over-representation of individuals from Francophone countries among the current global “jihadist population” –ultimately, the issue of a French “specificity” or “exceptionalism”. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the most recent academic and public debate on contemporary jihadism at the global level was spurred by the controversy arisen between two French experts on jihadism –G. Kepel and O. Roy. We will focus on this debate later in the present chapter, after having considered the main arguments of McCants and Meserole's thesis. Firstly, we will examine the point they make about urban marginality and poverty as predictors of radicalization in the Francophone-French context, by briefly analysing the conditions of socio-economic disadvantage of the French *banlieues* and presenting the positions of other experts on the matter. Secondly, we will analyse their main argument concerning France's approach to secularism and France's relationship with its Muslims citizens and their religion. Building on this, we will then assess the present state of play within academia and public opinion, by reflecting on the Roy-Kepel controversy, in the light of the interpretative perspective of radicalization processes that we will illustrate in the conclusion of the this Chapter – what we define an “ecological perspective” for understanding such phenomena from the sociological point of view. We will restrict our focus to France, as the situation in other Francophone countries is too different to be encompassed in the present analysis –indeed, not acknowledging this diversity is one of the main pitfalls of McCants and Meserole's approach, as we have already pointed out above (in fact,

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embodied by the principle of *laïcité*, whereas English is perceived as a ‘neutral’ universal language and used indifferently by Islamists from the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent” (see G. Kepel, B. Rougier, *Addressing Terrorism. European Research in Social Sciences and the Humanities in support to Policies for Inclusion and Security. A Policy Review*, European Commission–Directorate General for Research and Innovation, 2016). See Section 3 of the present Chapter for more on *laïcité* and secularism.



they too end up referring their argument essentially to the French case).

## **2. Banlieues and socio-economic disadvantage**

McCants and Meserole are not the only ones to point at poverty, urban marginalization and relative deprivation as crucial factors causing jihadist radicalization. This is actually one of the most recurring explanations of jihadism in public debates: following the dramatic jihadist attacks that occurred between 2015 and 2017 on the French soil, policy-makers and the media immediately connected the origins of radicalization with the situation of the *banlieues*<sup>12</sup>, i.e. the urban outskirts of main French cities, characterized by a vast socio-economic disadvantage, high levels of segregation and large concentrations of young French citizens of North African, Turkish and African origin, where Islam has gained a peculiar salience and visibility. Ten years after the most violent and widespread uprisings of recent French history, that had taken place in these areas, *les banlieues* were back in the spotlight and depicted as “the culprit”.

The harsh life conditions of *banlieues* are well known and have been amply documented. Studies on this issue identify two separate dynamics, which, precisely in the contexts of *banlieues*, intertwine and reinforce each other: on the one hand, mass unemployment, that has been spreading among the immigrant population since the second half of the 1970s due to de-industrialization processes; on the other hand, the concentration and segregation of unemployment in specific, circumscribed areas. These two phenomena created a cycle of perpetuation and reproduction, the one resulting from the other.<sup>13</sup>

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12 With reference to the *Charlie Hebdo* January 2015 attacks, the then-French Prime Minister Manuel Valls spoke of the existence of a “territorial, social and ethnic apartheid” regarding the immigrant population, “victim of discrimination”, “relegated in peripheral areas”, dominated by “social misery” which risks creating new “ghettoes”. Cf. “Valls évoque ‘un apartheid territorial, social, ethnique en France’”, *Le Monde*, 20.01.2015. Similarly, the French Socialist party deputy Malek Boutih, who suggested that so-called “sensitive neighbourhoods” (as the more problematic and deprived urban areas are called in the French administrative and political slang) be “put under special administration” in order to avoid their transformation into “fertile ground” for the spread of radicalisation phenomena; cf. “Malek Boutih plaide pour la mise sous tutelle de quartiers sensibles”, *Le Monde*, 20.01.2015.

13 C. Avenel, *Sociologie des quartiers sensibles* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010).

The immigrant population that was massively employed in large French industries in the post-war period and had settled in the vast social housing districts at the periphery of industrial cities near production plants, was left jobless following the colossal de-industrialization and economic crisis that ensued the Oil Shock of 1973. In the following decades, unemployment became endemic in those areas where the immigrant population was concentrated. The physical and social distance of residents from work opportunities in the city, the significant levels of discrimination both at school and in the job market towards youths with an Africa or North-African background and, lastly, the development of a parallel economy (based on drug dealing) all contribute to explain this dynamic of reproduction,<sup>14</sup> which has even led to an increase in the levels of segregation.<sup>15</sup> Thus, spatial relegation soon became social relegation, in a vicious cycle that has become difficult to break and has been affecting children and grandchildren of first immigrants for a long time.<sup>16</sup> In these areas, the opportunities for social mobility are significantly lower, to the extent that it is possible to speak of “social determinism” with respect to the conditioning exerted by segregation on *banlieues'* inhabitants.<sup>17</sup>

Much literature has been devoted to the repeated failures of the so-called *Politique de la Ville* –i.e. the various policies adopted by different French governments aimed at improving the life conditions in these areas, for instance in the domains of housing and education.

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14 Ibid.

15 J.-L. Pan Ké Shon, *Residential Segregation of Immigrants in France: an Overview*, INED-“Population and Societies”, n. 477, April 2011.

16 In the so-called “Zones Urbaines Sensibles” (ZUS) the proportion of large families and people with a foreign nationality is significantly higher (up to three times) compared to the national average. While the French national unemployment rate is of approximately 10%, in the ZUS it reaches 23%, and up to 42% for young people aged 15 to 24, compared to 23% in the rest of the country (ONZUS-Observatoire National des Zones Urbaines Sensibles, *Rapport 2014*). This is particularly significant if we consider that the most represented age range in these areas is that of under-25s. School dropout is extremely high and students of immigrant origin who reside in these areas are significantly higher probabilities to be channelled towards VET and less qualified educational tracks.

17 G. Kepel, *Banlieue de la République. Société, politique et religion à Clichy-sous-Bois et Montfermeil* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

For a number of reasons, these policy interventions have not reached the hoped-for objectives<sup>18</sup> and the socio-economic situation of the *banlieues* remains appalling.

The empirical studies focusing on the *banlieues'* children of immigrants demonstrate that the lives of these youths, often so turbulent and precarious, present recurrent traits, such as the impossibility of finding a job, the perception of education as useless, a day-to-day existence, often conducive to petty delinquency. In particular, these studies emphasize the *galère* experienced by these youths<sup>19</sup> -i.e., the daily presence of violence, of difficult family relations, of clashes with the symbols of the State, embodied in policemen or teachers, perceived as “racists”.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, a dominant theme in these studies is precisely how discrimination and racism persist in many patent or subtle forms and are still largely responsible for unemployment and educational difficulties.<sup>21</sup>

Still, although the marginalization and the exclusion experienced in these areas are unquestionable, establishing a cause-effect relationship between the segregation of immigrants and their descendants and jihadist radicalization seems reductive and problematic, in light of the complexity of contemporary jihadism and of its evolutions. More generally, the numerous studies that have explored the possible links between socio-economic deprivation and various mani-

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18 C. Avenel, *Sociologie des quartiers sensibles* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010); R. Epstein, *La rénovation urbaine. Démolition-reconstruction de l'état* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2013); G. Kepel, *Banlieue de la République. Société, politique et religion à Clichy-sous-Bois et Montfermeil* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

19 F. Dubet, *La galère. Jeunes en survie* (Paris: Fayard, 1987).

20 F. Khosrokhavar, *L'islam des jeunes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997); M. Shirali, *Entre islam et démocratie. Parcours de jeunes français d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007); L. Mucchielli, “Autumn 2005: a Review of the Most Important Riot in the History of French Contemporary Society”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35, 5 (2009), pp. 731-751.

21 R. Silberman, R. Alba, I. Fournier, “Segmented Assimilation in France? Discrimination in the Labor Market against the Second Generation”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30, 1 (2007), pp. 1-27; D. Meurs, B. Lhommeau, M. Okba, *Emplois, salaires et mobilité intergénérationnelle*, INED Documents de travail, n. 182, 2012; J. Fredette, *Constructing Muslims in France. Discourse, Public Identity and the Politics of Citizenship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014); D. Meurs, “The role of discrimination in immigrant unemployment”, in *INED-Population & Societies*, n. 546, July/August 2017.

festations of terrorism –including the jihadist one–refute the existence of a clear-cut, linear relationship between poverty and political violence. Actually, it has often been found that large sectors of the jihadist population are composed by educated and highly-educated individuals and that similar forms of Islamist extremism have significant probabilities to be withheld by the well-educated, both in Western and non-Western countries.<sup>22</sup> The fact that Muslims in USA and Canada enjoy a far better socio-economic condition than in European countries did not make USA and Canada immune to the surge in home-grown jihadism militancy on their territories. It is true that, at least in the case of France, many of the youths who have embraced jihadism and have either attempted to carry out an attack on the French soil or have joined jihadist groups like ISIS or the Al-Nusra front were economic under-performers. In numerous cases, they fit into the stereotype of the *banlieusard*, with a turbulent life, “*sans père ni repère*” (“without father nor reference points”), of the young person who is off the rails, without a life project, who has accumulated failures, who feels he or she is the object of stigma and disdain as an “Arab” or a “Muslim”, who has been the victim and/or the perpetrator of violence, who has been a gang member and was involved in petty crime, psychologically fragile and angry at an “unjust” society.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, at the same time, a consistent fraction of homegrown French jihadists is made up of middle-class individuals or converts. These simple observations can suffice to undermine the linearity of the argument that posits a nexus between poverty and jihadist radicalization, even for the French case. Therefore, the social-economic disadvantage affecting the *banlieues*, *alone*, cannot account for the motives behind the “success” of the jihadist militancy and narrative. If this were the case, then all of the millions of French (and

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22 For a brief analysis of these analyses, see L. Vidino, F. Marone, E. Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor. Jihadist Attacks in the West* (Milano: Ledizioni Ledipublishing, 2017).

23 F. Khosrokhavar, *Radicalisation* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2014); F. Khosrokhavar, “Les trajectoires jihadistes des jeunes français”, *Études*, n. 6 (2015), pp. 33-44; D. Thomson, *Les Français jihadistes* (Paris: Les Arènes, 2014).

European) Muslims, who suffer from the same profound marginalization,<sup>24</sup> would espouse jihadism, while only a statistically insignificant minority of them does. This question remains unanswered by the approaches that connect radicalization and political violence with poverty. It seems misleading, then, to concentrate *only* on social-economic deprivation as the one driver of radicalization. At best, it might be *one* among a series of factors, working in conjunction with them, and that *banlieues* might act as catalysts or accelerators within the intricate dynamics of radicalization processes-as we shall see later. Incidentally, the policy implication of this remark is that even an ambitious social policy agenda, aimed at improving the conditions of degraded and segregated neighbourhoods-albeit necessary and desirable-would not be sufficient as the *only* action for preventing radicalization, as other issues seem to be at stake.

### 3. Muslims and banlieues as Otherness

Why, then, did the French public debate in the aftermath of jihadist attacks concentrate on *banlieues*? Because *banlieues* have become the symbol of a perceived inherent “Alterity” condensing all possible “dangers” and “threats”: poverty, delinquency, migration and, above all, Islam. The concentration of immigrant workers in industrial peripheral neighbourhoods and especially the progressive impoverishment experienced by these areas, together with the emergence of large-scale violence and deviance phenomena, have forged the image of “Otherness”, already historically associated with the *banlieue*, considered the threatening “dark side” of modern “civilised” cities, since their origin.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, as the degradation of these neighbourhoods grew, the emergence of the first conflicts connected with the building of mosques and of the so-called *affaires du foulard* made the presence

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24 R. Alba, N. Foner, *Strangers No More: Immigration and the Challenges of Integration in North America and Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2015).

25 Although there exists some positive development, specifically concerning schooling-see L. Arslan, *Enfants d'Islam et de Marianne. Des banlieues à l'Université* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010) -and housing careers-see J.-L. Pan Ké Shon, “Residential Segregation of Immigrants in France: an Overview”, INED, *Population and Societies*, n. 477 (April 2011). Tellingly, the public discourse systematically overlooks such developments, thus reinforcing the myth of an irremediable “illness” of banlieues.

and rootedness of Islam in these areas gradually more visible and evident. As various scholars have pointed out, this is when the public discourse started adopting an explanation of the problems of the *banlieues* based on the cultural and religious variables.<sup>26</sup> The concept of *banlieue* has come to be equated with that of Islam, which, in turn, has morphed into a category of collective representation with a strongly negative connotation,<sup>27</sup> assigning an *a priori* derogatory identity to Muslims, who are considered radically “different”, problematic and “non-integrable”. According to this narrative, Islam is to be blamed for their alleged refusal to integrate and for their presumed desire to live “parallel lives”, separate from and in opposition to the rest of society, in territories—the *banlieues*—which are “lost” to the *République*.<sup>28</sup>

This leads us to consider the other point made by McCants and Meserole in their argument concerning the treatment of Muslim minorities in the framework of what they call “the French political culture”. Indeed, European countries in general, and France in particular, have developed a terribly fraught relationship with Islam and Muslim migrants over the past decades. According to Foner and Alba, this is due to two main reasons:

Muslim immigrants confront, on the one hand, majority populations that are mainly secular and therefore suspicious of claims based on religion and its requirements and, on the other, societal institutions and national identities that remain anchored to an important extent in Christianity and do not make equal room for Islam.<sup>29</sup>

This distrustful attitude towards the practice of Islam is exemplified by the controversies that have emerged and recurrently emerge across Europe over the “visibility” of Islamic symbols and over reli-

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<sup>26</sup> G. Kepel, *Banlieue de la République. Société, politique et religion à Clichy-sous-Bois et Montfermeil* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> C. Avenel, *Sociologie des quartiers sensibles* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010); R. Epstein, *La rénovation urbaine. Démolition-reconstruction de l'état* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> E. Préteceille, “La ségrégation ethno-raciale a-t-elle augmenté dans la métropole parisienne?”, *Revue française de sociologie*, 50, 3 (2009), pp. 489-519.

<sup>29</sup> N. Foner, R. Alba, “Immigrant Religion in the U.S. and Western Europe: Bridge or Barrier to Inclusion?”, *International Migration Review*, 42, 2 (2008), pp. 360-392.

gion-based demands: conflicts over mosques have taken place in almost every European immigration country –Italy, Germany, the UK;<sup>30</sup> the first harsh disputes on headscarves date back to the late '80s with the polemics generated by the *affaire du foulard* in France, then reached a peak when France introduced a ban on the wearing of *hijab* in its public schools in 2004, were revived by the ban on full veils adopted by both France and Belgium between 2010 and 2011 and finally erupted again in 2016 when some French municipalities prohibited wearing the *burkini* in public. While conflicts over mosques have to do with an acceptance of the visibility of the increasing diversification of the cultural and religious landscape of Western societies (e.g. the 2009 referendum held in Switzerland against “minarets”), headscarf-related controversies alternatively assume different tones: they either portray the veil as a sign of women's oppression in a backward religious community (the Muslim one), or depict it as a bold defiance of the purported principle of neutrality of the State towards religions (especially in France). Either way, at the core of these disputes is the alleged threat that Muslims, with their “outrageous” demands, would represent for Western democratic values, heralded as morally superior.<sup>31</sup> This negative depiction of Muslims could not but be reinforced following the 9/11 attacks, the killing of Theo Van Gogh, the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy in Denmark and elsewhere.

These events contributed to the “success” of the Huntingtonian thesis regarding the existence of a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West, which gained currency in most public debates at the global level.

While these portrayals of Islam as a “public enemy” are common to Western societies, there is indeed something specific to France, where the crystallisation of the public discourse on the compatibility of Islam with claimed Republican “values” and *laïcité* has led to a representation of the integration of Muslim immigrants as

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30 S. Allievi (ed.), *Mosques in Europe: Why a solution has become a problem* - NEF Initiative on Religion and Democracy in Europe, 2010.

31 J. Bowen, “How the French State Justifies Controlling Muslim Bodies: From Harm-based to Values-based Reasoning”, *Social Research*, 78, 2 (2008), pp. 1-24.

“failed”.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, France is characterized by a marked secularism. At the *institutional* level, this is the result of a century-old history of bitter confrontation between the French State and religious powers, through which the political power sought independence from and control over religious authorities. At the *societal* level, France was arguably more affected than other countries by the secularist tendencies that transformed Western societies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the *institutional* point of view, this secularist approach, on which State-church relations are based, translated into a principle of absolute neutrality towards manifestations of religion in the public sphere. Moreover, France's political tradition has historically been wary of the development of communitarian allegiances and identities, which postulates that there should be no intermediaries between the *République* and the citizen, who is depicted in universalistic terms, deprived of any cultural or religious affiliation or belonging. Thus, the citizen's religion has no room or legitimation within the political arena: it is to be strictly confined to his or her private sphere and should not form the basis for communitarian claims, which are perceived as particularistic, contrary to the universality and equality of rights. As Roy puts it, *laïcité*, from being a simple juridical principle of neutrality and equality, has been gradually transformed into a “principle of exclusion of religion from the public sphere”, becoming “nothing but the most ideological and explicit form of secularization”.<sup>33</sup> From the *societal* point of view, this tendency took the form of a fierce aversion to any manifestation of religion, perceived as regressive and obscurantist — particularly Islam, which has come to be automatically associated with pre-modern attitudes and practices.

In light of this, J. Césari concludes that Islam has not been granted “symbolic integration” into French society.<sup>34</sup> By symbolic integration, we may refer to the definition of integration as the process of be-

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32 J. Fredette, *Constructing Muslims in France. Discourse, Public Identity and the Politics of Citizenship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).

33 O. Roy, *Le djihad et la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 2016), p. 115 —our translation.

34 J. Césari, *Why the West Fears Islam: An Exploration of Muslims in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).



coming an *accepted part of society*, provided by Penninx.<sup>35</sup> For Césari, the lack of symbolic integration “means that Islam as a religion has been outcast from the main public secular cultures of Europe, as well as securitized”<sup>36</sup> with a public discourse growing more and more hostile towards Islam, and more and more reluctant to include Islam within the national narrative. This, in turn, leads many young Muslims to feel deep sentiments of humiliation and frustration in relation to their origins, religion and identity.

#### **4. Banlieues, re-Islamisation and Salafism**

Of course, such a cultural struggle against Islam generates significant consequences. As demonstrated by numerous studies, the discrimination and the exclusion faced by many French youths with a migrant background ultimately translates into a strong sense of injustice: they feel they are as perpetually condemned to positions of inferiority.<sup>37</sup> This causes a reaction of refusal of the French mainstream society, which often results in a turn to Islam as a source of identity, as a way to “reverse the stigma” and to claim dignity. Indeed, children of Muslim immigrants show an increased religious consciousness –a tendency that has been termed “re-Islamization”.<sup>38</sup> It is precisely this “othering” process that pushes young second-generation Muslims to interrogate themselves about their belonging, their religion and their

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35 Rinus Penninx *European Cities and their Migrant Integration Policies*. A State-of-the-Art study for the Knowledge for Integration Governance (KING) Project, King Project Overview Paper n.5/July 2014.

36 J. Césari, *The Lack of Symbolic Integration of Islam in Europe, as Illustrated by the Charlie Hebdo Attacks*, Reviews & Critical Commentary—Council of European Studies, 2015, <http://councilforeuropeanstudies.org/critcom/the-lack-of-symbolic-integration-of-islam-in-europe-as-illustrated-by-the-charlie-hebdo-attacks-2/> (last accessed: 9 January 2018).

37 L. Mucchielli, *Autumn 2005: a Review of the Most Important Riot in the History of French Contemporary Society*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35, 5, (2009), pp. 731-751; L. Arslan, *Enfants d'Islam et de Marianne. Des banlieues à l'Université* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010); Y. Brinbaum, M. Safi, P. Simon, *Les discriminations en France: entre perception et expérience*, INED Documents de travail, n. 183, 2012; G. Kepel, *Banlieue de la République. Société, politique et religion à Clichy-sous-Bois et Montfermeil* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

38 N. Foner, R. Alba, “Immigrant Religion in the U.S. and Western Europe: Bridge or Barrier to Inclusion?”, *International Migration Review*, 42, 2 (2008), pp. 360-392; G. Kepel, *Banlieue de la République. Société, politique et religion à Clichy-sous-Bois et Montfermeil* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

religiosity. For many, such a questioning results in a re-evaluation of their religious affiliation or in a discovery of religion, followed by a firm adhesion to its tenets. This gained particular visibility precisely in the *banlieues* of major French cities, simply by virtue of the mere presence and concentration of immigrants and their descendants in these areas. However, the “*banlieue* effect” has remarkable symbolic consequences, because the isolation and the socio-spatial segregation of the *banlieues* causes stigmatization and racism to be perceived as collective experiences, which are interpreted in light of a conflictual dynamic between a “periphery”, and a “centre” (represented by the French cultural and political elites). The “centre”, by considering immigrants' religion incompatible and irreducibly “other” (in the terms described above), is seen as denying these young people the opportunity to grow a positive identity –hence, the turn to Islam, which can even culminate in the development of an *oppositional* identity. Naturally, this “opposition” is not intrinsic to the practice of Islam per se, but is *constructed* as a reaction to a *constructed* negative image of Islam and *banlieues*. Over and beyond material social conditions, what seems to be essential is precisely this tense relationship with mainstream French society.

Thus, this cultural struggle or symbolic battle has started being fought also on the “Muslim side”, and this has gradually become more evident with the diffusion of Salafism. Re-Islamisation is a multifaceted phenomenon and has assumed many different forms<sup>39</sup> –one of them is Salafism. As documented by several scholars,<sup>40</sup> this puritan and intransigent form of Islam has been slowly on the rise during the past ten-fifteen years in Europe and especially in France. Although it is practiced by a very tiny fraction of French Muslims, it spread across the country and gained more and more visibility, in particular in its

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39 O. Roy, *L'Islam mondialisé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004); N. Foner, R. Alba, “Immigrant Religion in the U.S. and Western Europe: Bridge or Barrier to Inclusion?”, *International Migration Review*, 42, 2, (2008), pp. 360-392.

40 G. Kepel, *Banlieue de la République. Société, politique et religion à Clichy-sous-Bois et Montfermeil* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012); G. Kepel (with the collaboration of A. Jardin), *Terreur dans l'Hexagone. Genèse du djihad français* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015); M. Ali Adraoui, *Du golfe aux banlieues. Le salafisme mondialisé* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013).

most impoverished and deprived areas.<sup>41</sup> Salafism represents a strong form of cultural and identity rupture in contemporary Western societies, as the adhesion to its tenets implies a refusal of modern Western society as “unholy”, “impure” and “depraved” –terms borrowed from the religious language that Salafists employ to describe their conflictual relationship with society. Salafism can be characterized as an antagonist “counter-culture”, founded on uncompromising, ultra Orthodox and ultra-conservative religious norms, which disavow mainstream Western societies' values and codes of behaviour.<sup>42</sup>

As such, it constitutes an extreme and “radical” choice: even if it concerns only a very small proportion of French Muslims, it represents a powerful source of identitarian cleavages. For a part of disenfranchised youths, who feel refused by a hostile society, this represents a way to reverse the stigma.<sup>43</sup> By professing the separation of every single aspect of everyday life between what is “pure” and “impure”, seeking to avoid any kind of contact with all non-Muslims, the “Salafist thinking” promotes a binary vision of the world, as if it was divided between “the good” and “the bad”. To the perceived discrimination and humiliation, a fraction of Muslims have slowly started re-

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41 G. Kepel, *Quatre-ving-treize* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012); G. Kepel (with the collaboration of Antoine Jardin), *Terreur dans l'Hexagone. Genèse du djihad français* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

42 M. Ali Adraoui, *Du golfe aux banlieues. Le salafisme mondialisé* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013).

43 Another major driver of the success of Salafism is the process that Olivier Roy defines as the “deculturation of religion”, i.e. the disconnection between culture and the Islam in contexts of emigration (2004; 2008). Among many second-generation Muslims, such a disconnection fosters a quest for a “purified” Islam, deprived of any cultural reference: this entails “going back to the sources” to learn what the “real”, “pure” Islam is through a literal reading of the Scriptures. In this framework, Salafism gains followers precisely because it claims to adhere to the pure “Islam of the origins” practiced by the “companions of the Prophet” (according to the etymology of the name of the movement) and to be grounded in an absolutely literal reading of the Quran and of the hadiths: thus, Salafists can easily depict themselves as the “custodians” of the correct religious norm. It is out of the scope of the present Chapter to illustrate the complex dynamics of “deculturation” and their consequences, but understanding them is key to the to the comprehension of today's jihadism. See O. Roy, *L'Islam mondialisé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004) and O. Roy, *La sainte ignorance* (Paris: Seuil, 2008) for a detailed account, or G. Mezzetti, *Contemporary jihadism; a generational phenomenon*, ISMU Working Papers-July, 2017 for a more succinct explanation.

sponding by adopting the Salafist oppositional *habitus*, purporting a vision of society according to which “the West” is “bad” and incompatible with Muslim (Salafist) values and behaviours –indeed, such a Manichean vision ends up being just as paranoiac as the one that considers Muslims as “unintegrable”.

### 5. Is there continuity between Salafism and jihadism? The Roy-Kepel controversy

In light of this, the aftermath of the jihadist attacks experienced by France has been dominated by heated debates which focused on the possible role of the practice of Islamic religion in radicalisation –this was no coincidence, given the above-described French context of “fear” and rejection of religion. Attention was particularly drawn to the potential responsibility of Salafism, based on the assumption that Salafism and jihadism share commonalities and that the “separatist” attitude endorsed by Salafists may be conducive to jihadist violence. In particular, the public debate has polarized around the two opposite positions of O. Roy and G. Kepel. As we will attempt to demonstrate by adopting an *ecological perspective*, neither Roy or Kepel is “right” or “wrong”: each of the two sheds light on an important part of the story, and their points of view can actually appear complementary.

On one hand, based on his study of *banlieues*, Salafism and Islamic actors and movements in France, Kepel argues that the analysis of jihadism should be centred on the drivers of the success of Salafism, studying how Salafism is engaging in a strife to impose its hegemony over the Muslim community, suggesting a continuity between Salafism and Jihadism,<sup>44</sup> also because the two movements share a common orthopraxy.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Roy maintains that we are not confronted with a “radicalization of Islam”: rather, an opposite dynamic is at work, i.e. that of an “Islamicisation of radicalism”

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44 G. Kepel (with the collaboration of A. Jardin), *Terreur dans l'Hexagone. Genèse du djihad français* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015); G. Kepel, B. Rougier, *Addressing Terrorism. European Research in Social Sciences and the Humanities in support to Policies for Inclusion and Security. A Policy Review*, European Commission–Directorate General for Research and Innovation, 2016.

45 See O. Roy, *Le djihad et la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 2016) for a critique of the common argument that Salafists' orthopraxy is similar to the jihadist one.

through jihadism.<sup>46</sup> Roy—who is anyhow not completely dismissive of the role of Salafism—challenges Kepel's depiction of Salafism as a direct “conveyor belt” of jihadism based on research evidence. Taking a closer look at the knowledge of religion and the degree of religiosity of those implicated in today's jihadism, it appears that most of them were not religious at all, prior to their “radicalization”.<sup>47</sup> In other words, before joining the “jihadist cause”, these persons did not show any interest for Islam or actual knowledge of the Scriptures. Indeed, they were not “pious”: their religiosity was recent and very fragile, and it often seems to be the effect, or the result, of their adhesion to jihadism, and not the cause. As some point out, a stable and consolidated religious identity shields from violent radicalization.<sup>48</sup> In jihadists' first-person accounts, it appears that those who join a Salafi community—a quietist one—immediately leave it, motivating this choice with the fact that “they are too quiet, they do not speak about jihad”.<sup>49</sup> In other accounts, the pre-eminent violence of these persons emerges in their clarity. It appears that the sincere and genuine practice of religion—even when it takes the form of Salafism—does not seem to drive to political violence or violent extremism.

Indeed, while it is true that Salafism rejects the rest of the society living apart from it—Salafists do live in their closed-off Salafi communities—it is important to bear in mind that distancing from society does not automatically mean aiming at destabilizing or attacking society. According to most observers, the overwhelming majority of French Salafists are quietist and are not at all interested in politics, claiming that no political or violent action should be taken against “misbelievers”.<sup>50</sup> Actually, there is a fundamental difference between

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46 O. Roy, “Le djihadisme est une révolte générationnelle et nihiliste”, *Le Monde*, 24.11.2015; O. Roy, *Le djihad et la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

47 O. Roy, *Le djihad et la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 2016); F. Introini, G. Mezzetti, “Storie di jihadismo. Il processo di radicalizzazione e la sua plausibilità”, in *Fondazione ISMU-XXII Rapporto sulle Migrazioni 2016* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2017), pp. 293-318.

48 F. Khosrokhavar, *Radicalisation* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2014).

49 D. Thomson, *Les Français jihadistes* (Paris: Les Arènes, 2014).

50 There exist other streams within Salafism, especially in Egypt, which advocate for political militancy and justify the creation of political parties but they represent a minority within Salafist communities residing in Western countries. See M.

Salafists and jihadists: the first escape from a society, which they perceive as hostile and distrustful, seeking refuge in an exacerbated practice of religion; the second express their refusal of society through the practice of violence under the label of “jihadism”.

We are thus confronted with the spread of Salafism, on the one hand, and the spread of jihadism, on the other. As we have just seen, one should not look at Salafists' sincere religiosity as the driver of violent radicalization. How could jihadism be explained, then? In an ecological perspective, we suggest that the forms of identity rupture caused both by the spread of Salafism on the one hand and the treatment of the Muslim minority on the other constitute “fertile ground” for the diffusion of jihadism, which could grow precisely grafting onto the fragmentation along identitarian cleavages that is underway within European societies. Kepel has been severely criticized because, by putting religion at the centre of his analysis, his approach appears culturalist, as if jihadism was intrinsic to Islam and represent the quintessence of the practice of Islam.<sup>51</sup> It is true that Kepel's account presents this serious risk, which should not be underestimated: his view should be “handled with care”. However, his analysis undeniably draws attention to the existence of growing identitarian cleavages within French society, of which Salafism is an evident manifestation. While his limit is to focus primarily on Salafism, without paying the due attention to the “other side” of the present cultural struggle (French mainstream societies and elites), at the same time his emphasis on the success of Salafism is helpful in tracing the contexts in which jihadism developed. Thus, to many youths, jihadism appears as the only “ideology”, or “movement”, that *makes sense* and appears *plausible* within today's “ideological offer”, because of the *enabling environment* it is surrounded by. In ecological perspective, jihadism could grow and gain success thanks to the aggravation of identitarian cleavages represented on the one hand by Salafism, on the other hand

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Ali Adraoui, *Du golfe aux banlieues. Le salafisme mondialisé* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013).

51 V. Geisser, “Éduquer à la laïcité, rééduquer au ‘bon islam’? Limites et dangers des réponses culturalistes et misérabilistes au terrorisme”, *Migrations Société*, XXVII, 157 (Janvier-Février 2015), pp. 3-14; O. Roy, “Le djihadisme est une révolte générationnelle et nihiliste”, *Le Monde*, 24.11.2015; O. Roy, *Le djihad et la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

by the growing hostility towards Muslims shown by majority societies.<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, as Roy emphasizes,<sup>53</sup> while the quest for the practice of violence seems to be the main “detonator” for the adhesion to jihadism, an ecological perspective helps us understand that such a quest for violence could not take this “jihadist form” without the presence and the diffusion of Salafism in the first place, highlighted by Kepel.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Salafism “bears its responsibility”: jihadists choose a fanatic, violent and extremist form of Islam as it currently represents the only available and plausible form of antagonism. This form of Islam embodies the most radical, efficacious and “frightening” expression of Alterity that “the market” can currently offer-but the “market” is shaped also by the presence, in ecological terms, of actors expressing similar forms of antagonism, i.e. Salafist communities. In other words, the mere presence of Salafist habits and practices in the surrounding “environment” contributes to increase the gradient of reality of the jihadist worldview. Without suggesting that there is a direct continuity between quietist Salafism and jihadism (indeed, there is not such a continuity), it may be said that, for a young person who already has a “need to be radical” and seeks a channel for venting this need, joining jihadism can seem more plausible and “natural” than joining other expressions of political violence, precisely because the choice of embracing jihadism occurs in a context characterised by the spread of identity fractures similar to jihadism, such as those embodied by Salafism. With its rejection of and isolation from mainstream society and the Manichean worldview it offers, Salafism contributed to con-

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52 French troubled colonial past and legacy also play a significant role in the process of “Othering” and inferiorization of North-African migrants and their descendants –ultimately contributing to today’s radicalization processes. This is why, among both French jihadists and French Salafists, there are high proportions of persons with an Algerian migratory background. For second-generation Algerians, the process of “deculturation” reached its peak due to the lack of homogenous national culture in the country of origin; moreover, the wounds inflicted by colonial rule and the tormented colonial past that binds France and Algeria caused serious identitarian conflicts on Algerian migrants and their descendants. See G. Kepel, *Quatre-vingt-treize* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012); O. Roy, *Le djihad et la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

53 O. Roy, *Le djihad et la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

54 G. Kepel (with the collaboration of A. Jardin), *Terreur dans l’Hexagone. Genèse du djihad français* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

vey the plausibility of the jihadist option—even if jihadists are not interested in Salafists' rigorous and strict religious practice. To conclude, both perspectives—Kepel's and Roy's—are necessary to understand current radicalization phenomena: they are actually complementary.

## **6. An ecological perspective to understand jihadist radicalization**

As we have just seen, an ecological perspective enables the reconciliation of two apparent opposed conceptualizations of jihadism. But what do we exactly mean by “ecological perspective”? These conclusive reflections seek to illustrate what constitutes an ecological approach and why it can be fruitful to apply such an approach to the study of jihadism, by appraising the teachings of the “French case”.

The present analysis of the dynamics of jihadist radicalization in France shows how this phenomenon is strictly tied to some very specific elements rooted in the history and the socio-political structure of this country and its culture. However, it is important to bear in mind that contemporary jihadism has proved to be also a global phenomenon: home-grown terrorists and foreign fighters represent a threat with a genuine global reach concerning the West in general, and not just Europe.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, underlining the global dimension of radicalization and jihadism without paying due attention to national and local factors could lead to other kinds of reductionisms and interpretative mistakes. Global jihadism, just as globalization *tout-court*, should not be understood as an autonomous domain, imposing itself, as a huge macro and homogeneous force pushing local and national contexts in the same direction and producing the same effects everywhere. Moreover, emphasizing the “globality” of jihadism very often means attributing a pivotal role to the media, and to the internet in particular, which, in turn, can lead to other kinds of misinterpretations of the whole phenomenon and of the functioning of the media sphere itself. Of course the media do play a fundamental part in radicalization processes; nevertheless, if we focus solely on their role, we might run the very dangerous risk of transforming them into a causal force,

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<sup>55</sup> Looking beyond Europe, the recent wave of jihadist attacks has concerned the USA (with the Boston marathon bombing in 2013, the San Bernardino and the Pulse mass shooting in 2015 and 2016 respectively, the attack in New York city in 2017) and Australia (with the hostage crisis in Sydney in 2014).



whose effect is a deterministic coercion upon subjects. This leads, in turn, to a simplistic (but common) representation, which assigns agency only to the media and depicts radicalized people as completely passive brainwashed individuals.

This is also the reason why radicalization processes are often conceptualized in psychological —if not psychiatric— terms, with medicalizing effects, which become clearly visible in the way in which de-radicalization is sometimes conceived and practiced. This way of addressing contemporary jihadism is, after all, particularly congruent with the cultural grounds of contemporary Western culture and its “devotion” to secularization<sup>56</sup> -another consequence of modernization and globalization-which overlooks the role of religion and prevents us from attributing to religion any status of effectiveness in social processes. Therefore, according to this dominant view, when religion “seems” to matter, it is just because, in a top-down perspective, other forces and actors exploit it for other purposes -namely, political purposes-so that those who claim to act in the name of religion cannot be but “manipulated”.

Nevertheless, if there is a convergence point between the two giants of the contemporary debate on jihadism, Roy and Kepel, it is just the fact that both share the methodological assumption of “trusting the believer”. In other words, there can be authentic commitment —hence agency too— in people who decide to adhere to a radical perspective. Thus, conceptualized in a Bergerian way,<sup>57</sup> jihadism may have its *plausibility*, even in the acceptance of its extreme consequences. But plausibility and its strength is function of the way in which the social world and its structures are able to support the ideas we believe in. Otherwise stated, an idea, be it political, religious or philosophical, has to find around itself a social world which is congruent with it and that can make this very idea reasonable and spendable inside it. However, according to the perspective that we adopt, this congruence is not a question of mere correspondence between ideas, on one side, and the structures of the world, on the other. It is, more

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56 On secularization and its consequences on the sociological understanding of radicalization and jihadism, see F. Introini, *Religione e radicalizzazione. Un nesso che sfida l'occidente*, ISMU Working Papers-April 2017.

57 P. L. Berger, *L'Imperativo eretico: possibilità contemporanee di affermazione religiosa* (Torino: Edizioni Elledici, 1987).

precisely, the result or the consequence of a *process of construction* according to which ideas make their way in the world by constructing the world able to host them or make room for them.

To put it more concretely: what does it take for an idea to become grounded in a world? It takes a heterogeneous network of actors and elements which mobilize around this very idea, and progressively establish a strong and stable alliance between them. The wider and more heterogeneous is the network, the tightest are the ties among its elements, the more it becomes “real”, concrete, consolidated. This perspective entails, in other words, a gradual ontology according to which reality is a trajectory out of “virtuality” or “potentiality”, so that it becomes fully real only at the end of a non-linear process of associations among different elements whose relationships have become, step-by-step, stable and black-boxed.

This perspective is an ecological interpretation of Latour's Actor-Network Theory.<sup>58</sup> Through such an “ecological perspective”, we highlight two main points: 1) anything, be it an object, a scientific law, an institution, is the result of and is built through a *network process* such as the one briefly described above; 2) inside such networks, there is a strong and inextricable relation between ideal elements, material elements and human subjects. This means adopting a perspective in which agency is re-distributed among different actors and in which it is impossible to draw a clear-cut line separating ideas, materialities and human agency. The strength of an ideology and its capability “to win hearts and minds” is not the result of a pure, cognitive process; rather, it is the consequence of the width and the intensity of its circulation, enabled by the human and material network supporting and making possible this same circulation.

It is important to notice that the materiality of the network, which enables this circulation, is not just instrumental to the diffusion of immaterial ideas: actually, it represents the same reason why ideas become more attractive, because they can appear as a part of a concrete whole, a “real world” making a life inspired by and consistent with them concretely possible and meaningful. At the same time, every new alliance gained by this network enhances its power because

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58 B. Latour, *Reassembling the social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

adds to its “gradient of reality”.<sup>59</sup> Ideas build the networks, giving them plausibility; this very plausibility, in turn, gives ideas more power to expand the networks of their circulation.

Applying this perspective to our object of study means observing that, the more jihadism expands its “structures”, the “thicker” its reality and the stronger its capability to enroll new allies; these alliances, increase its “gradient of reality” and so on, in a sort of autocatalytic process. Pantucci<sup>60</sup> claims that radicalization is the emerging outcome of three factors: ideology, networking e grievances. Rabasa and Benard<sup>61</sup> underline that mosques are not pivotal just as “ideological” loudspeakers, but as hubs of relation and networking.

Vidino, Marone and Entenmann<sup>62</sup> highlight the importance of what they call “hubs of radicalization”. The way in which Horgan and Altier<sup>63</sup> and other research groups inspired by their perspective<sup>64</sup> conceive the difference between “de-radicalization” and “disengagement” teaches us that it is not so easy to understand if people get involved in radicalized groups because they share their radical ideas or, on the contrary, if they share these ideas because they want to join them in the first place.<sup>65</sup> These interpretations share a common understanding of radicalization processes; what we want to emphasize, by means of Actor-Network theory, is that ideas and networks are not separable or, in other words, that the network is not merely instrumental to the cir-

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59 B. Latour, *Science in action. How to follow scientists and engineers through society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

60 R. Pantucci, *We Love Death as You Love Life. Britain's Suburban Terrorists* (London: Hurst&Company, 2015).

61 A. Rabasa, Ch. Benard, *Eurojihad. Patterns of Islamist Radicalization and Terrorism in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

62 L. Vidino, F. Marone, E. Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor. Jihadist Attacks in the West* (Milano: Ledizioni Ledipublishing, 2017).

63 J. Horgan, M.-B. Altier, “The Future of Terrorist De-Radicalization Programs”, *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 13, 2 (2012), pp. 83-90.

64 RAN (Radicalization Awareness Network), *Preventing Radicalization to Terrorism and Violent Extremism. Approaches and Practices*, European Commission –Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2016; ISD (Institute for Strategic Dialogue), *De-radicalisation*, PPN Working paper, 2010.

65 Y. Dandurand (2014), “Social Inclusion Programmes for Youth and the Prevention of Violent Extremism”, M. Lombardi, E. Ragab, V. Chin, Y. Dandurand, V. de Divitiis, A. Burato, *Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism Among Youth to Prevent Terrorism* (Amsterdam: IOS Press BV, Amsterdam, 2014).

culuation of ideas, but is fundamental in building their plausibility. To use a metaphor, cars and trains would not exist without railway systems and roads.

What are the advantages we can gain applying a perspective inspired by Actor-Network Theory to the analysis of jihadism and radicalization? First of all, as Latour<sup>66</sup> clarifies, Actor-Network Theory' major power is its anti-essentialist way of reasoning. In this view, anti-essentialism means an approach that does not assume any aprioristic category or theoretical construct to produce its analyses – such as “banlieue”, “Salafism” or “Islam” in our case. According to Latour, sociology should disregard all of the concepts it has been adopting in its history as *explanans* (starting from the very concept of “society”). According to Latour, the *explanans* must be considered as the *explanandum*. This means also that the researcher cannot assume in advance any kind of distinction between what is a cause and what is an effect and about the way different elements are linked between each other. This is why he suggests substituting the word “sociology” with the word “socio-logics”.<sup>67</sup> Hence the researcher has to follow the ways-the (socio)-logics-in which actors compose the world they live in or, in a more anthropological fashion, their “Cosmograms”, without starting from the conviction that there exists just one, true, master logic against a multitude of deceptive ones. In a constructivist perspective, as Actor-Network Theory is, there is not a “rear world”,<sup>68</sup> i.e. an objective structure authorizing and legitimizing this distinction. We just have to follow the connections and to be open to every possible- and frequently astonishing-results. With reference to our object of study, we cannot start by assuming that we are in front of either a religious or a political phenomenon: in such a view, politics and religion would be essences or *explanans* aprioristically assumed. This also means discarding every other “essence” frequently referred to in the debate about radicalization and jihadism, such as “ummah”, as if it was an essence with a direct causal power able to “radicalize” people.

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66 B. Latour, “On recalling ANT”, J. Law, J. Hassard (eds.), *Actor-Network-Theory and After* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), pp. 15-25.

67 B. Latour, *Science in action. How to follow scientists and engineers through society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

68 B. Latour, *Reassembling the social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

On the contrary, our approach requires to ask which actors, in which ways, on which targets, by which means—both material and immaterial—produce as a result the widespread (mis)conception that “ummah” plays a pivotal role in the processes of radicalization.

This is also true for other constructs, *a fortiori* those that have become “naturalized”, such as *banlieue*. The *banlieue*<sup>69</sup> is not a homogeneous context, expressing, in a “durkheimian” fashion, a mono-causal force. According to an ecological perspective, the *banlieue* as a global whole must be deconstructed into the discourses, the actors, the material dimensions, the social representations which have led us to perceive it in this fashion, i.e. as a heterotopia. As we tried to explain, the image of the *banlieues* and of Islam as the “Other” is the result of a discursive construction—peculiar to the French context. Thus, far from being a monodimensional “force”, it is a network of heterogeneous elements and players, whose agency is contextual. In our perspective the *banlieue* has to be conceived of as a *peculiar ecology*, which favours the construction of a world in which jihadist radicalization become plausible, because the *banlieue* condenses in a relatively confined material and figurative space a series of elements and players that can build a particular “structure of plausibility” of jihadism. So, just as *banlieues*’ socio-economic disadvantage, *alone*, cannot account for the complexity of radicalization dynamics, Salafism, *alone*, per se, does not absolutely work as a mechanic, deterministic precursor or a direct “conveyor belt” of jihadism. Concerning Salafism in particular, the French case demonstrates that it is a *contextual* factor, which contributes to shape the plausibility of jihadism only in very specific, segregated and stigmatized contexts. Thus, the material living conditions of the *banlieues*, their spatial and social segregation, and most of all, their representation as a “threatening heterotopia” all function as catalysts, transforming *banlieues* into possible accelerators of the process of radicalization, where the spread of Salafism contributes to forge the “plausibility” of the appeal of jihadism in that it represents an identitarian rupture that shapes a favourable “environment” for jihadism.

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69 F. Introini, G. Mezzetti, “Storie di jihadismo. Il processo di radicalizzazione e la sua plausibilità”, Fondazione ISMU-XXII *Rapporto sulle migrazioni 2016* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2017), pp. 293-318.

An ecological perspective also means adopting a gaze that looks beyond “micro” and “macro”, “local” and “global”: according to this standpoint, things and phenomena *become* global or local, as a consequence of the network of alliances they establish.<sup>70</sup> Hence, with reference to jihadism, we can trace both global and local factors. As we stated above, global spheres and phenomena are not “a given”: rather, they are *constructed* by different actors who are always concretely located somewhere. To quote Latour, every network, albeit “global”, is local in each of its points.<sup>71</sup> This means that in the study of jihadism we have to pay a very careful attention to local or national factors (even personal factors of course), without falling into the pitfalls of a “methodological nationalism”. On the contrary, we should espouse the sort of “methodological cosmopolitanism” suggested by Beck with his transnational approach to contemporary society.<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps an ecological perspective may look like an approach that takes into account too many things and too many factors, giving the impression that “if anything matters”, then nothing really matters in the end. We can surely agree that an ecological standpoint represents an invitation to multidimensional analyses, but, as we tried to clarify in these conclusions, the authentic impact of such an approach is a plea to change the questions that must be posed in the face of phenomena like jihadist radicalization. If the question is “how much the jihadist world is (or, better, has *become*) real for a wannabe jihadist?” or, in other words, “to what extent has jihadism become plausible?”, this means that the research task must be, first of all, that of following and tracing the way(s) in which this world is “becoming real” and of reconstructing the extent to which this reality can be produce concrete effects and bring about changes. Adopting such research questions and criteria changes the whole approach to the elements involved. Studying radicalization does not mean observing a person's trajectory as a kind of “journey into folly”. Of course, individual trajectories and psychological factors are at stake, but we should also attentively consider

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70 B. Latour, *Reassembling the social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

71 B. Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).

72 U. Beck, N. Sznaider, “Unpacking cosmopolitanism for the social sciences: a research agenda”, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61, 1 (2010), pp. 381-403.

the way in which a world, around radicalized subjects, acquires its reality and gains momentum. Thresholds and limits can be more easily overcome when people do not think they are “the exception”, but fell rather in tune with a whole system, that proves consistent with and supportive of their choices and decisions.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, in an *ecological perspective*, and recalling McCants and Meserole's thesis, we can conclude that the presence of Salafism, in a stigmatized context like that of the *banlieue*, surrounded by the distrustful attitude of French mainstream society, all contribute to make in the jihadist “option” less and less “exotic” or “absurd”. In sum, these might be considered the most salient traits of the French situation that constitute an enabling environment, susceptible of fostering jihadism.

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<sup>73</sup> This perspective generates important changes concerning how the role of the media is approached. They maintain their pivotal role, but it is possible to explain it in a very different way. They are not manipulators or “hidden persuaders” (at least not only), but a fundamental actor in the construction of such a world. As a digital network, they are part of those networks which, intertwining with each other, give reality to it. Media have to be considered for their capability to give presence and livability to the jihadist world and not as brainwashing machines.





**Ius soli, between human rights and  
terrorism prevention. The Italian case**  
*Viviana Premazzi*

## **1. Introduction**

According to the survey “Gli italiani e le migrazioni: percezione vs realtà Terza Rilevazione ISPI –RaiNews– IPSOS”,<sup>1</sup> a small minority of Italians (2%) consider immigration as a resource for the country while 67% of respondents think that migration represents a threat to Italian security, of what 38% believe that it may even increase the risk of terrorist infiltration. Less than 30% of the same respondents believe instead that immigration is an inevitable phenomenon that does not directly threaten Italy and should only be at best managed. This perception of immigration is certainly motivated also by the increasing number of terrorist attacks in Europe, some perpetrated by migrants of first or second generation claiming allegiance to Islamic fundamentalist groups and by the significant arrivals of migrants and refugees who have challenged the EU's internal cohesion. But this perception is, above all, instigated by the media and their alarmist and emergency tones “with four titles/news out of 10 with an anxiety potential”, as shown by the fifth report on the representation of migration, realized by the association Carta di Roma in 2017.<sup>2</sup> They have been instrumentally used by populist and nationalist movements to raise public concerns. Governments' counter-terrorism and security response in almost all countries risks to generate a decrease in civil liberties and rights whilst already existing individual and group grievances can be boosted by these strategies.

Moreover, the fact that governments protect the safe and security of the whole population are responsible for violating rights of some stigmatised communities risks to spread a narrative that makes the message of violent extremist organisations even more attractive.<sup>3</sup>

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1 ISPI-RaiNews-IPSOS, *Gli italiani e le migrazioni: percezione vs realtà. Terza Rilevazione* (Milano: ISPI, 2015).

2 P. Barretta, G. Milazzo, *Notizie da Paura, Quinto Rapporto Carta di Roma 2017*, Osservatorio di Pavia, Carta di Roma, 2017.

3 G. I. Vila Luca, *Building a bridge: engaging civil society in preventing all forms of violent extremism* (08 Euromed Survey, IEMed, 2017), pp. 40ff.

In particular, this approach to civil liberties and rights in some countries has affected naturalisation and the right of migrants' children to citizenship being reflected in proposals to withdraw or deny citizenship to suspects of terrorism (and occasionally to their families). This was particularly true for the reform of the citizenship law in Italy that is still under discussion after a first approval in 2015 at the Chamber of Deputies. In the last years, the debate about the reform of citizenship in fact has been often ideologically polarized in slogans and hashtags (#yesius soli or #noius soli), generating confusion and increasing xenophobia on one side and resentment on the other, in particular among the second generations.

On the other side, “luckily”, in Italy, a home-grown jihadist scene has only recently emerged in the country and it is still unstructured and relatively small in size, especially in comparison with other Western European countries. But, according to Marone,<sup>4</sup> one of the most renowned experts on jihadism and foreign fighters in Italy, jihadist militants are usually second-generation children of Muslim immigrants, in addition to converts and it cannot be ruled out that Italy's strict naturalisation laws can have the effect of exacerbating feelings of resentment in some individuals of immigrant origin, indirectly facilitating potential radicalisation processes.

Could, therefore, Islamic radicalization transform in the answer to second generation frustration? Could jihadism channel their anger?

As again Marone highlights: “one of the reasons why Italy has been still untouched from terrorist attacks, according to security and intelligence sources, seems to depend on the use of counter-terrorism measures and, in particular, on the extensive use made of expulsions and deportation orders, associated with restrictive citizenship law. Obviously, the measure of administrative deportation is not exempt from risks and shortcomings, like human rights violations and the undesirable effect of intensifying the feelings of frustration and anger and even the sense of revenge, at the individual level due to a double standard, reinforcing the narrative of victimhood and persecution, so

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4 F. Marone, *The Use of Deportation in Counter-Terrorism: Insights from the Italian Case* (The Hague: ICCT, 2017).

recurrent in the propaganda of jihadist groups, and facilitating the terrorist recruitment of other people”.<sup>5</sup>

The chapter will therefore discuss the reform of citizenship in Italy in comparison with other European countries and the debate around it considering a national security perspective and the importance of social inclusion to prevent radicalism and to foster counter-terrorism policies.

## 2. The reform of the citizenship law

The current law on citizenship, n. 91/1992, penalizes young children of immigrants not allowing them to enjoy full recognition of civil and political rights and keeping them in the legal status of “Italians with a residence permit”, risking, as already mentioned, to feed disappointments and forms of resentment.<sup>6</sup> The right to be citizens and the rights guaranteed by being citizens, in fact, are of fundamental importance for the second generation and young people of foreign origin, forced for years, once they turn 18, to renew their residence permit given by the condition of “non-immigrant foreigners” in which they find themselves.

Organized through the Network *G2-Seconde Generazioni*,<sup>7</sup> the second generations have advanced, over the years, different requests for the reform of the law in addition to the request for changes to the regulations so that they contain clear and explicit criteria regarding the methods of obtaining the citizenship, eliminating or at least reducing the high level of discretion of the public administration officers. As evidenced by the work of the Network *G2 Seconde Generazioni*, moreover, besides the enjoyment of rights, the citizenship is also an important channel of participation: a way to be recognized as equal, to be creators of their own destiny and to give an active contribution to the community. The participation guaranteed by citizenship consists in the “right to have rights”, as Hannah Arendt<sup>8</sup> claimed, to have a voice, an important possibility to state their opinion, an instrument that

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> E. Colombo, L. Domaneschi, C. Marchetti, *Nuovi italiani e trasformazioni della cittadinanza* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.secondegenerazioni.it>

<sup>8</sup> H. Arendt, *Le Origini del Totalitarismo* (Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, 1996), p. 413.

supports personal empowerment and the ability to participate without undergoing discretionary discrimination.<sup>9</sup> Being able to express, as citizens, their opinion means having the opportunity to be known, to defend against improper accusations or stereotyped and negative representations and to build, on a par, interactions with Italians as a new mixed political, social and cultural community.<sup>10</sup>

Young people of foreign origin who have lived in the country the whole path of socialization from infancy to adulthood, remain excluded, however, from the granting of citizenship as this is not automatically conferred, but is subject to the possession of certain requirements. The law on citizenship in Italy is, in fact, articulated around the principle of *ius sanguinis*, the “right of blood” that allows children of Italians to obtain citizenship only directly from their parents, “inheriting” from them. The children of immigrants who are born on the Italian territory in order for obtaining the citizenship must stay in Italy uninterruptedly until the age of eighteen, and from that moment they have only one year to present the application for the acquisition of citizenship in their municipality of residence. After this year, if the application for citizenship has not been submitted, the second generations must follow the same procedure as their parents, i.e. stay in Italy with a residence permit for study, work or family reasons, or otherwise, they have to leave the country.<sup>11</sup> The 1992 Citizenship Law has been the subject of debates and reform proposals for several years.

In 2012, the G2 Network, with the support of the Soros Foundation, drew up the Dossier “G2 Chiama Italia: Cittadinanza, rispondi!”, within the G2 Parlamenta project, which, through various awareness-raising activities, addressed to Members of the Italian Parliament, going from the distribution of dossiers and documentation, to

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9 E. Colombo, L. Domaneschi, C. Marchetti, *Una nuova generazione di italiani: L'idea di cittadinanza tra i giovani figli di immigrati* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2009), pp. 24-25.

10 V. Premazzi, “Una nuova generazione “diversamente” italiana”, F. Cappè (ed.), *Generazione Erasmus. L'Italia dalle nuove idee* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2011), pp. 101-108.

11 V. Premazzi, “Secolarizzazione e nuove forme di protagonismo e religiosità della seconda generazione musulmana in Italia”, G. Salmeri G., M. Díez (eds.), *Troppo religione o troppo poca?: Cristiani e musulmani alla prova della secolarizzazione* (Padova: Marsilio, 2016), pp. 106-116.

the creation of videos and other communication materials, was aimed at providing an updated picture on the current status of the children of immigrants in Italy. Moreover, two national petitions submitted by the G2 Network (along with 21 other organizations<sup>12</sup>) to the Chamber of Deputies in the context of the Campaign “L'Italia sono anch'io”, a national campaign for the rights of citizenship, on the 150th anniversary of the Italian unification. In addition to the two bills it is important to report the awareness and information campaign “18 anni in...Comune”, carried out by the G2 Network in collaboration with ANCI and Save the children, for the new adults born in Italy and entitled to citizenship. The initiative aimed to urge the Municipalities to promptly inform children born in Italy from foreign parents of this opportunity when they come of age. Following the campaign “18 anni in...Comune”, a handbook was also made available free of charge in all the Municipalities and on ANCI website, Save the children and G2 network, with all the new regulations concerning the acquisition of Italian citizenship for the second generations. Furthermore, the explanations introduced by the implementation of the Law n. 98/2013 also known as “Decreto del fare” has institutionalized the objectives of the Campaign. Then, through the application of the rules contained in the Law, several municipalities have also facilitated the preliminary phase of the request for citizenship. Article 4, paragraph 2, of the law n. 91/92 provides, in fact, that “the foreigner born in Italy, who has resided legally without interruption until reaching the age of majority, becomes a citizen if he/she declares that he/she wants to acquire Italian citizenship within a year of the said date”.

The implementation of the Law n. 98/2013, art. 33 “Semplificazione del procedimento per l'acquisto della cittadinanza per lo straniero nato in Italia”, states, at paragraph 1, that, “for the purposes of the acquisition of Italian citizenship by the foreigner born in Italy and residing there uninterruptedly for eighteen years, any breaches attributable to the parents or to the offices of the public administration are not attribut-

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12 Acli, Arci, Asgi-Associazione studi giuridici sull'immigrazione, Caritas Italiana, Centro Astalli, Cgil, Cnca-Coordinamento nazionale delle comunità d'accoglienza, Comitato 1° Marzo, Coordinamento nazionale degli enti locali per la pace e i diritti umani, Emmaus Italia, Fcei –Federazione Chiese Evangeliche In Italia, Fondazione Migrantes, Libera, Lunaria, Il Razzismo Brutta Storia, Rete G2– Seconde Generazioni, Sei Ugl, Tavola della Pace, Terra del Fuoco.

able to the interested applicant” and that he/she can demonstrate possession of the requirements with any other appropriate documentation.<sup>13</sup>

The extensive interpretation of article 4 of Law n. 91/92 was according to Mohamed Tailmoun,<sup>14</sup> spokesperson of the G2 Network, an important result because it authorizes the offices of the public administration to also consider as evidence of the uninterrupted presence in Italy other documents in addition to registration, such as school attendance, certificates obtained or certificates of attendance of courses, or registration from the pediatrician/doctor, interpreting the article in favour of the applicant. Another important result of the campaign “18 anni in ... Comune” was an improved relation between many mayors (and administrations) and second-generation young people and the development of information offices dedicated to the second generation, as in Milan, in 2013, the creation of the G. Lab, laboratory of urban citizenship, an information desk about citizenship, work and study for young people, families, teachers and cultural operators. All these campaigns and awareness activities led in the summer of 2015 to the approval by the Constitutional Affairs Commission of the Chamber of Deputies of the unified text of citizenship reform. The text collected the 24 bills of law on the amendment of the law n. 91/92, introducing the principle of *ius soli temperato*: citizenship to those born in Italy from parents legally residing for at least 5 years, and the *ius culturae* for kids who arrive in Italy before the age of 12.

The proposal of reform was approved by the Chamber of Deputies, in October 2015 and the 15 of June 2017 the proposal arrived in the Senate, where it caused chaos initiated by the Northern League party senators that following this episode submitted new proposals for amendments —reaching the number of 48,408 requests of changes. Since then, the debate has always been postponed and then periodically considered in the summer or before Christmas, on the eve of the closing of parliamentary debates. This was, according to the leaders of

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13 V. Premazzi, “Seconde generazioni e identità religiosa alla prova della cittadinanza”, A. Ferrari (ed.), *Libertà religiosa e cittadinanza. Percorsi nella società plurale* (Padova: Marsilio, 2017), pp. 24-36.

14 Interview by the author, 21 July 2015.

the G2 Network, a sign of the little attention given to the topic,<sup>15</sup> but at the same time it was also a sign of the strategic importance of the issue also for electoral purposes and consensus.

According to G. Zincone,<sup>16</sup> the ideological false contrast between citizenship conceived mainly as an instrument of integration (typical of the left) and citizenship conceived as a reward for accomplished integration (typical of the right) is still prominent in Italian political discourse, as well as in that of European countries: “it is evident that, on one hand, nationality legislation has always required some signs of either potential (*ius soli*, long residence) or actual integration (observance of the law, knowledge of the language of communication) and that, on the other hand, a generous citizenship regime conveys a public message of acceptance of immigrants as a welcome part of the population and can consequently help integration, though it is in no way definitive”.<sup>17</sup>

This is what expressed by Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, interviewed by the newspaper *La Repubblica*, in June 2017, stating that “granting citizenship to children born in Italy from immigrant parents is the right thing to do and will make Italy safer”. The Prime Minister also replied to those who “agitate the spectre of a threat to our security in a wholly unjustified way” that counter-terrorism experience teaches that the only way to root out and prevent radicalism is social inclusion, not marginalization and discrimination, “to those who stoke such fears, we must say extending citizenship to these children. It is not just a matter of conscience and civil rights, but also one of security”.

But Italy was not the only place in Europe to face the citizenship issue: the recent significant migration waves in some parts of the world have in fact forced many affected countries to discuss and renegotiate their citizenship policies. These have included moves to more restrictive as well as to more generous policies for granting citizenship to immigrants.

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15 Interview by the author, 21 July 2015.

16 G. Zincone, *Citizenship Policy Making in Mediterranean EU States: Italy*, EUDO Citizenship Observatory (Firenze: EUI, 2010).

17 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

In Germany,<sup>18</sup> for example, the change came into force in 2000, for the first time introducing *ius soli*. Citizenship was formerly based on *ius sanguinis* and naturalisation with strict conditions. In Portugal<sup>19</sup> in 2006 *ius soli* (which had been radically restricted in the 1970s, prior to which pure *ius soli* applied to all born on any Portuguese territory) was reintroduced in forms of double *ius soli* and facilitated naturalisation, based on parental residence of five years and four years of the child's schooling. Luxembourg introduced double *ius soli* in 2009 (including for those under eighteen in 2009), and, as dual nationality was admitted at the same time, this constituted a significant change with an almost immediate effect.<sup>20</sup> The Greek parliament on March 11 2010 passed the legislation that grants *ius soli* citizenship at birth on the basis of parental residence, double *ius soli* (provided parents are resident) and provides for declaration when they come of age (also on the basis of conditions of parental residence and the child's education in Greece).<sup>21</sup> In 1999 Austria introduced a form of *ius soli* citizenship for the first time by offering facilitated naturalisation at age eighteen.<sup>22</sup> In 2002 Slovenia introduced facilitated naturalisation at age of eighteen by form for children resident since birth. In 2003 Finland introduced an option at majority.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Muslims in Europe perception vs reality, guests or citizens?

Even if media and politicians in Europe and, in particular in Italy, stress sometimes the risk of Islamization and Islamic terrorism, especially after the proclamation of the so-called Islamic State in 2014 and the attacks carried out by ISIS supporters in Europe, it is incorrect

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18 K. Hailbronner, *European Immigration and Asylum Law. A Commentary* (Oxford: Beck/Hart, 2010), pp. 7ff, 16ff.

19 I. Honohan, *The Theory and Politics of Ius soli*. EUDO Citizenship Observatory (Firenze: EUI, 2010).

20 See D. Scuto, *Luxembourg: Country Report*. EUDO Citizenship Observatory (Firenze: EUI, 2010) and D. Scuto, *Luxembourg Publishes Statistics on the 2009 Nationality Law*. EUDO Citizenship Observatory (Firenze: EUI, 2010).

21 D. Christopoulos, *Greece: Comprehensive Citizenship Reform Passed in Parliament on 11 March*. EUDO Citizenship Observatory, (Firenze: EUI, 2010).

22 D. Çinar, *Austria: Country Report*. EUDO Citizenship Observatory (Firenze: EUI, 2010).

23 I. Honohan, *The Theory and Politics of Ius soli*, EUDO Citizenship Observatory (Firenze: EUI, 2010).



to speak of an 'Islamic invasion': according to an updated survey at the end of 2017 of the Pew Research Center, in fact, there are about 25.7 million Muslims registered in Europe: 4.9% of a population of over 740 million people, with highest percentage in France (5.7 million, 8.8% of the population) and Germany (about 4.9 million, 5.5% of residents). Between 2010 and 2016 there was a growth of about one percentage point, from 3.8% to 4.9% (from 19.5 million to 25.8 million). The numbers could double by 2050, however, reaching a maximum of 11.2 percent. In other words, an average of an Islamic EU citizen every 10, just above the current standards of the French population.

In Italy, according to data estimates by IDOS,<sup>24</sup> Christians constitute 53.8% of the immigrant population, Muslims 32.2%, the 4% of the whole Italian population. In 2017 among immigrants, Muslims were over 1.5 million while the majority were Orthodox Christians to whom we need to add up another million of Catholics.<sup>25</sup>

Given these data, however, the perception is totally different as showed by an Ipsos Mori survey<sup>26</sup> that measured the gap between public perception and reality in 40 countries in 2016 and found that in Italy actual Muslim population was 3.7% while the perception was 20%. But this was not only the case for Italy, the average French estimate was that 31% of the population was Muslim –almost one in three residents while they were 7.5%. And also German and Belgian respondents all guessed that more than a fifth of the resident population was Muslim, while in reality the figure ranges from 5% in Germany to 7% in Belgium.

As we said citizenship means not only rights but also political participation. This was truly especially for immigrants in Italy and for religious immigrant groups. In this regard, it is interesting to see the differences between the first and second generation of Muslims and their forms of political participation and active citizenship. For the parents' generation, the cognitive frame within which the relationship with the institutions is placed is that of immigration, which relies on the dialectics within a community that put its cultural-value roots in a

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24 IDOS, Dossier Statistico Immigrazione (Roma: IDOS, 2015).

25 IDOS, Dossier Statistico Immigrazione (Roma: IDOS, 2017).

26 Ipsos Mori, Perils of perception 2016.

place that has a plurality of origins but a single religious reference and sometimes adverse context.

For the children, the reference to immigration and diversity must be abandoned: the relationship is between (almost) citizens, among residents who are committed to the common good of the community and the city where they live.

However, it is not only the type of relationship with the Italian context that distinguishes the way in which parents and children show and live their religious belonging and their social and political participation: young Muslims do not see Islam as the reproduction of the religious practices of the country of origin of their parents in a new context.<sup>27</sup> As the research entitled “Young Muslims in Italy. Parma and Verona” by Della Porta and Bosi<sup>28</sup> shows, the Islam of the second generations is shaped more as a way of life resulting from a choice that helps them to understand themselves and feel to be part of a community.

Very often identification with Islam is felt more sharply than identification with a particular ethnic or national group. The *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia* (GMI) association is an example: it is a nationally based association, but Italy is the reference, and is a religious organization, made up of young second generations whose parents have different national origins. Among them, in fact, there are Moroccans, Egyptians, Tunisians, as well as Somalis and Pakistanis.

The association's goal is not just to claim rights for their own group, but actively to participate in the society. After having defined ‘who they are’, the association tries to answer the question ‘what they can do in and for the society where they live’.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, Internet and the social networks, in particular, have been an important channel of participation for these young people, especially due to their excellent level of Italian language and civic skills

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27 V. Premazzi, R. Ricucci, “Between national mass media and the local dimension: Muslims and Islamophobia in Italy”, Forum for Arab and International Relations (ed.), *Islamophobia* (Doha, 2017), pp. 63ff.

28 D. della Porta, L. Bosi, *Young Muslims in Italy Parma and Verona* (Denmark: The Denmark School, CIR, Aarhus University, 2010).

29 V. Premazzi, R. Ricucci, “Between national mass media and the local dimension: Muslims and Islamophobia in Italy”, Forum for Arab and International Relations (ed.), *Islamophobia* (Doha: 2017), pp. 63ff.

their. These young people (or now young adults) are turning more into representatives, trying to outline the birth of an Italian Islam free from the constraints of tradition and the contexts and the influence of their parents' countries of origin.<sup>30</sup>

Some Italian cities, such as Milan and Turin, have developed in their policies specific attention to the second generations, considering them important players in building and strengthening social cohesion processes. This, as R. Ricucci<sup>31</sup> has shown, has taken place “[...] especially in areas where interactions between natives and immigrants may be more difficult and where controversies on cultural and religious diversity happen year after year, stimulated by increased visibility, an increase in the number of citizenship grants, the increase of students in schools and the demands of Muslim associations”.

This choice results in supporting the associations and their leadership, with a view to the promotion and growth of the idea of active citizenship, while also finding a space for the religious dimension.

At local level the main objectives of first-generation Muslims regarded basic needs such as the allocation of spaces devoted to places of worship and some form of cultural recognition and rights. The Muslim associations were therefore dedicated to essential requests for observance of Islamic practices (e.g. authorization for the opening of halal butchers, the allocation of building land for the construction of mosques and places of worship, areas dedicated to the burial of Muslim dead, Halal food in public canteens, religious assistance in hospitals, army and prisons etc.). In this process, the associations were an important reference for both the community and for the local institutions.<sup>32</sup>

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30 V. Premazzi, R. Ricucci, “Religious belonging in the Facebook era: Muslims on line, young people off line”, D. Enstedt, G. Larsson, V. Pace (eds.), *Religion and Internet. Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), vol. 6, pp. 147ff.

31 R. Ricucci, *Cittadini senza cittadinanza. Immigrati, seconde e altre generazioni: pratiche quotidiane tra inclusione ed estraneità* (Torino: Edizioni SEB27, 2015), p. 56.

32 V. Premazzi, “Secolarizzazione e nuove forme di protagonismo e religiosità della seconda generazione musulmana in Italia”, G. Salmeri, M. Díez (eds.), *Troppo religione o troppo poca?: Cristiani e musulmani alla prova della secolarizzazione* (Padova: Marsilio, 2015).

Compared with the first generations, for the younger, second generations, the relationship with the public institutions moves towards participation: they are more prepared both linguistically and with regard to civic skills acquired about the role and functions of public administrations and they aim to be recognized as partners and representatives. They want to be present and active in the city's social and cultural events, to participate wherever possible in the decision-making process, too, especially with regard to young people of Muslim faith, to strengthen the view that Islam is compatible with citizens' activism marked by pluralism and democracy. As yet, Ricucci<sup>33</sup> highlights: "The purpose has not been so much the recognition tout court of their specificities, but their right to diversity and the promotion of intercultural policies where religious difference is one of the elements of the city and not a reason of conflict".

A number of studies have also shown that the local community, more than the national one, is a strong identity reference for immigrants and, in particular, for Muslim immigrants in Europe. A study on the Muslim community in Waltham Forest, one of the London 2012 Olympic districts, for example, revealed an attachment to their neighbourhood stronger than that felt towards the UK. On the opposite, non-Muslims of the same neighbourhood showed greater loyalty to the UK.<sup>34</sup>

In Europe, and in Italy in particular, Muslim organizations are highly evolved at the local level, thanks to the vast possibilities offered by legislation on associations, whereas it is much more difficult for Muslim organizations to manage relationships at the national level with the central institutions of the State, because the lack of a national agreement (*Intesa*) with the State and of the internal fragmentation of the Muslim community in Italy, often generating fierce competition dynamics and preventing the expression of a stable and reliable unified representation.<sup>35</sup>

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33 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

34 J. Cesari, *Religion and Diasporas: Challenges of the Emigration Countries*. INTERACT Research Report 2013/01, p. 5.

35 A. Pacini, "I Musulmani in Italia", paper presented at the University of Padua's Political Sciences Faculty during the seminar on Islam in Europe and in the World, organized by GRIM, 2001, p. 7.

#### 4. A national pact with the Muslim communities

It is in this context that the reference to the second generations contained in the “Patto Nazionale per un Islam Italiano” (National Pact for an Italian Islam) of February 2017 should also be considered.

This document too is part of the strategy to promote security against the Islamic terrorism, but seeking also to meet the need of the Muslim communities that signed the pact (11 associations),<sup>36</sup> to obtain official recognition, a signing of commitment from both parts, the government and the Islamic community, towards the long-awaited agreement (Intesa). The prevention of the terrorist threat and the fight against Islamophobia (or, rather, to the culture of the suspect that generates it) were, therefore, the ground on which the agreement was built, an agreement that, for the first time and unlike previous initiatives,<sup>37</sup> envisages not only a commitment requested to the communities, but also of the Ministry itself.

The pact is thus configured as a mutual recognition of values and activities already established by the Islamic communities. As S. Allievi,<sup>38</sup> one of the members of the Council for Relations with Islam who contributed to the drafting of the document, states: “we must not think, in fact, that the agreement forces the Islamic communities to come out. Many of the points-if not all-contained in the Pact have already been accomplished by the associations/communities living in Italy. This signature means guaranteeing it on both sides and ratifying their commitment with an institutional signature, which safeguards the security of all Italians- Christians and Muslims-and which guarantees the recognition and full integration of those who are Muslims and Italians at the same time”.

In the final part of the pact, then, an explicit reference is made to the planning of “one or more meetings of national and public im-

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36 Unione delle comunità islamiche italiane (UCOII), Confederazione Islamica Italiana (CII), Centro Culturale Islamico d'Italia (CICI), Comunità Religiosa Islamica (COREIS), Unione degli Albanesi Musulmani d'Italia (UAMI), Associazione Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, Associazione Madri e Bimbi somali, Associazione italiana imam e guide religiose, Moschea di Palermo, Admi, Associazione italo-pakistana Muhammadiyah.

37 For example, the Carta dei Valori della Cittadinanza e dell'Integrazione (Chart of Citizenship Values and Integration).

38 See also R. Catalano, “Un Patto per L'Islam italiano”, *Città nuova. Cultura e informazione*, 2017.

portance between the institutions and the young Muslims” recognizing the importance of these youngsters for the future of the Italian Islam. As already highlighted in a previous commentary on this issue<sup>39</sup> a greater relevance could have been dedicated to it and to the importance of intergenerational dynamics, also in relation to the different ways in which the fathers will place themselves towards the “Islam of the children”: destined to be confined in associations of “eternally young”, co-optated to influence the guidelines or entitled to be recognized as a “third way” able to express authority, prestige and representation (given the skills related to the Italian context and to the context of origin) “for an Italian Islam”. For P. Naso,<sup>40</sup> coordinator of the Council for relations with Islam, in fact, young people will be “essential actors in every policy of integration and intercultural dialogue today, and especially tomorrow”.

The pact, however, also brings with it the risk for Muslims to feel they are under surveillance and to have to prove each time to be true believers and good citizens, as already noted by Brahim Baya, the spokesperson of the Associazione Islamica delle Alpi (Islamic Association of the Alps) and Taiba Mosque, among the promoters and signatories of the Pact of sharing values of the city of Turin, following Minister of Interior’s statement after the meeting of the Committee with representatives of the main Islamic communities and associations and the Council for relations with Italian Islam in the summer of 2016.<sup>41</sup>

If one of the objectives, repeatedly called by the Minister of Interior Minniti, was to dissociate immigration and terrorism without, however, underestimating the link between lack of integration and terrorism, the same term “lack of integration” risks of being perceived by many already stabilized Muslim residents on the territory-and in some cases Italian citizens-as a treatment for “second-class citizens”, who find themselves, once again, to receive an exceptional and unique treatment waiting to sign the agreement with the Italian State, a consti-

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39 V. Premazzi, *Il Patto Nazionale per un Islam italiano: passi avanti e passi indietro nel dialogo con l'Islam* (Torino: FIERI, 2017).

40 See also Agenzia NEV, “Firmato al Viminale il “Patto” con l’Islam italiano”, *NEV.it Notizie Evangeliche*, 2017.

41 V. Premazzi, *Il Patto Nazionale per un Islam italiano: passi avanti e passi indietro nel dialogo con l'Islam* (Torino: FIERI, 2017).

tutional instrument to be used in relations with religious organizations that would provide them with full legal and social recognition in the country. The feeling of being “treated unequally” also emerges from the comments on the paragraph in the pact dedicated to mandatory accessibility and guaranteed by the Ministry of the Interior of the places of worship to non-believer visitors. If this commitment arises from the need to counteract Islamophobia through knowledge, responding to the concerns of Italian society towards a religion that continues to be considered and perceived as mysterious, incomprehensible by language and threatening for the use made by terrorists and propaganda of the Islamic State, on the other hand it is experienced by the Muslims themselves as a condition of “protection but also surveillance” and of subordination: to face the feeling of mistrust and stigmatization, the risk is to trigger reactions of ethnic and religious identification. Already in 2015, in an analysis carried out as part of the project “Conoscere il meticciano. Governare il cambiamento” of the Oasis Foundation in Milan, the Muslim citizens interviewed expressed the desire to be judged for what they really had been doing in their everyday life and not on the basis of potential risks of radicalization and terrorism or unfounded suspicions.<sup>42</sup>

Lastly, as we have already seen above, the media contribute in the “creation of the Other”, of perception vs reality, where a Muslim identity is reified and they can be considered as eternal guests or a threat to security without being recognized as citizens and members of Italian society.<sup>43</sup> The second generation appeared to have helped to break down the wall of mistrust erected against Muslims after 9/11. One of the effects of the New York attacks was in fact the building of an ideal of “we”, as opposed to “they”, the Muslims.<sup>44</sup> In recent years, thanks to all the work done by Muslim second-generation associations, the border seems to have moved to include the second generation in

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42 See also S. Coglievina, V. Premazzi, “L'Islam in Italia di fronte al fondamentalismo violento”, M. Diez, A. Plebani (eds.), *La galassia fondamentalista tra jihad armato e partecipazione politica* (Padova: Marsilio, 2015), pp. 126ff.

43 R. Salih, “The Backward and the New: National, Transnational and Post-national Islam in Europe”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30, 5 (2004), p. 1001.

44 A. Pogliano, V. Premazzi, “Il giornalismo e le seconde generazioni di migranti. Un'analisi critica dei rituali dei media”, *Sociologia Italiana–AIS Journal of Sociology* (2014), p. 92.

the “community of us” through, however, the almost total exclusion of the first generation and the creation of a new line of separation between the first and second generations.<sup>45</sup> This “selection ritual” reinforces the typical selectivity of journalistic narratives, marking the boundary between those who can be included and who is excluded, showing the values of youth, of beauty, of assimilation to Western fashion, of individual courage that is expressed in resisting the tradition to embrace some forms of “Italian values” to cross the symbolic border and become part of “our community”. It is produced, however, through the inscription of these events in the macro-frame of the “clash of civilizations”,<sup>46</sup> proposing as a way to integration a media-oriented version of cultural assimilation. The media are fundamental, therefore, not only as a vehicle, but as the places where a ritual process that separates the excluded ones from the included is building. But this border has been again called into question by the recent ISIS attacks in Europe and the departure of foreign fighters, some of them also second and third generations, from Europe to Syria and Iraq, threatening to include the second generation in that “they” whose religion has been perceived as dangerous and incompatible with “our” culture and society.

### 5. The Italian foreign fighters

Italian authorities begin to monitor home-grown jihadists in the late 2000s and early 2010s, but their numbers are still relatively small. This is due to a negligible presence of pre-Syrian conflict militant Salafist groups such as *Sharia4Belgium* in Belgium or al-Muhajiroun in the UK. When one looks to recent estimates for other large European countries, such as France (at least 1,700 fighters), Germany (940), the United Kingdom (around 850); and even when compared to less populous countries such as Belgium (470), Austria (300) and Sweden (300),<sup>47</sup> finds out that Italy has a jihadist scene substantially

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45 Ibid.

46 S. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

47 Cf. A. P. Schmid, J. Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective*, Research Paper (The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague (ICCT), December 2015); B. Van Ginkel, E. Entenmann (eds.), *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies*,



smaller in size.<sup>48</sup> The largest national contingent in the West is the French one: in December 2017, the French authorities declared that about 1,700 French foreign fighters left for Syria and Iraq since 2013, approximately 400-450 were killed, 250 returned to France, 500 are still in the conflict zone. There are therefore around 500 individuals, whose traces have in fact been lost. On the other side, according to data released by the Italian Ministry of Interior in August 2017, only 125 individuals with ties with Italy (only a minority of whom are full-fledged Italian citizens) left the country to join various jihadist groups (mostly the Islamic State) in Syria, Iraq and other Middle Eastern conflict zones. From this contingent, 37 individuals died and 22 returned to Europe.<sup>49</sup>

Some of the jihadists are “second generation immigrants” albeit only a few of those possess Italian citizenship based on available data, most, on the contrary, are still first-generation migrants. Moreover, the use of the term “second generations” has also its own implications, as very few cases can be defined as second generations in the strict sense because they have not completed their socialization path in Italy, even sometimes only the last years of compulsory schooling if arrived after the 14 years and therefore they cannot even be considered generation 1.25 according to the classification adopted by Rumbaut.<sup>50</sup>

Experts<sup>51</sup> explain this situation with a demographic factor: unlike other Western European countries, large-scale Muslim immigration to Italy began only in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and therefore the first wave of “second-generation Muslims” has only recently entered adulthood. Needless to say, radicals represent only a tiny

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Research Paper (The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism–The Hague (ICCT), April 2016); D. H. Heinke, “German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and Its Implications”, *CTC Sentinel*, 10, 3, (2017), pp. 17ff; R. Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees* (The Soufan Center, October 2017).

48 L. Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics* (Milan: ISPI and European Foundation for Democracy, 2014).

49 *Dossier Viminale-Ferragosto 2017* (Rome, Ministry of the Interior, 15 August 2017), p. 9.

50 See R. G. Rumbaut, “Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States”, *International Migration Review*, 38, 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 1160ff.

51 L. Vidino, F. Marone, E. Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West* (Milan: ISPI/PoE-GWU/ICCT-The Hague, 2017).

minority of the Muslim presence within the country and the issues cannot only be considered from a demographic/generational point of view but to the fact that becoming adults they are more aware of the inefficiencies, discrimination and denied rights they have to face daily with the risk that those frustrations could produce reactive identities.

This is also complicated by the fact highlighted above that the idea of them being included in the community of “us” is then opposed by a reality of rights and of a society that exclude them.

The contingent of Italian foreign fighters is also ethnically diverse, with cases encompassing individuals from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, and South Asia.

Counter intuitively, a significant number of Italian jihadists do not reside in large metropolitan areas and big cities, but in small cities and rural areas throughout the country. This can also be linked to the fact that in the big cities integration projects are developed and supported by municipalities while these are less popular in the small towns or in the countryside. While some Italian jihadists had troubled backgrounds with extensive criminal records or histories of mental illness, others came from stable families and appeared to be well-integrated.

Regarding the present and the future of European jihadism, one of the big issues the European States and that also Italy will soon have to face is the returnee phenomenon. In relation to the entire European continent, according to estimates in 2017, in fact, 30% of the foreign fighters had already returned from the conflict area. In Italy, at present, eleven foreign fighters have returned from the war territories and are currently being monitored by the intelligence also because Italy represents an important symbolic target for jihadist groups. The city of Rome, in particular, has great iconic value, as the cradle of Christianity and a major symbol of Western civilization.<sup>52</sup>

Rome in fact has been frequently mentioned as a target in jihadist propaganda. Moreover, the Italian government has played an active role in various Middle Eastern conflicts, deploying troops to Afghanistan and Iraq (both during the 2003 invasion and currently as

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52 F. Marone, *The Use of Deportation in Counter-Terrorism: Insights from the Italian Case* (The Hague: ICCT, 2017).

part of the anti-ISIS coalition) as well as substantial intelligence and soldiers in the Libyan strife.

Lorenzo Vidino, Director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University's Centre for Cyber & Homeland Security, suggests that radicalisation is a highly complex and individualised process and identifies structural (root causes) and individual motivations (personal factors) that sometimes interact with each other: political tensions and cultural cleavages, the shock of a life-changing event and the influence of a mentor.<sup>53</sup> As shown by Vidino, motivations “range from a search for identity to anger over discrimination and relative economic deprivation”.<sup>54</sup> Today more than ever, the socio-economic motivation, the gap between natives and immigrants, in terms of employment and education opportunities, is not enough: other reasons are also emerging more related to moral values and purpose for life as well as exclusion and lack of rights, terrorism prevention should be discussed and considered for effective programmes of counter-radicalization.<sup>55</sup>

The French anthropologist Dounia Bouzar confirms: “Radicalization used to be limited to the poor and the uneducated. But the situation has changed today”.<sup>56</sup> Some European foreign fighters, in fact, hold college degrees and do not come from deprived neighbourhoods or face a precarious socio-economic and professional situation. Among the second generations, there are those who feel as if they have no future and are disappointed for not being recognised and ac-

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53 L. Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics* (European Foundation for Democracy and ISPI, 2014).

54 L. Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics* (European Foundation for Democracy and ISPI, 2014), p. 28; A. Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33, 9 (2010), pp. 797ff; R. Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 4, 4 (2011), pp. 7ff.

55 F. Marone, “The Italian Way of Counterterrorism: From a Consolidated Experience to an Integrated Approach”, S. N. Romaniuk et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 479ff; L. Vidino, *L'Italia e il terrorismo in casa: che fare?* (Milano: Epoké-ISPI, 2016); V. Premazzi, “Oltre la motivazione socio-economica, il fascino del Califfato tra i giovani figli di immigrati in Europa”, A. Pin, C. Pellegrino (eds.), *Europa e Islam attualità di una relazione* (Padova: Marsilio, 2016), pp. 66ff.

56 D. Bouzar, *La vie après Daech* (Paris: Editions de l'Atelier, 2015), p. 34.

cepted as equal citizens. However, the foreign fighter phenomenon is more than a signal of failure of integration policies. As Roy highlights, those who joined ISIS shared “the youth culture of their generation, they probably drank alcohol, smoked pot, towed girls and then, one day, they decided to (re)convert to the religion of their fathers but in the Salafi version, because they rejected the culture of their parents and even the “Western” culture, which become the symbol of their self-hatred”.<sup>57</sup> This is also because they perceive themselves as excluded and without the same rights as their peers (like exclusion from the exams for state level employment or from the opportunity of mobility within the European Union). They believe the Islam proclaimed and lived by the jihadists is the right path to follow to be a good Muslim and the Islamic state is the only place in the world where one can be a good Muslim. In addition, the charm and strength of the message of ISIS compared to that of other fundamentalist groups, including Al Qaeda, is that ISIS has offered the young who fail to find their place in the West both for socio-economic reasons, rights, opportunities, values and lifestyles, not just a cause to fight for, which makes them feel part of the community (*ummah*) of the believers, but also a physical place where they can be full citizens and true believers.<sup>58</sup>

## **6. Terrorism and counter-terrorism strategy: the challenge of citizenship**

In one of the most popular ISIS propaganda videos, “Clanging of the Swords”, in particular the fourth episode, at a certain point a foreign fighter is clearly seen taking the floor and showing his Kosovar passport. Surrounded by other comrades who wield passports of different nationalities, he announces the expansion of the Islamic State under the caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, promises war against the infidels by brandishing the saber, planning the cleansing of the Arabian Peninsula by the dictators, announces the conquest of the Zionist Jerusalem, of Rome and of Spain.

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<sup>57</sup> O. Roy, “What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism? –A scientific perspective on the causes/circumstances of joining the scene”, speech at European University Institute, BKA Autumn Conference, 18-19 November 2015.

<sup>58</sup> See also V. Premazzi, “Oltre la motivazione socio-economica, il fascino del Califfato tra i giovani figli di immigrati in Europa”, A. Pin, C. Pellegrino (eds.), *Europa e Islam attualità di una relazione* (Padova: Marsilio, 2016), pp. 66ff.

As L. S. Battaglia<sup>59</sup> points out, the sequence has its peak of drama and action when the Kosovar foreign fighter loudly declares his belonging to the one and only *umma* identified in the Islamic State and steps on his passport, soon imitated by all the others. Later in the video the same scene is repeated: the foreign fighter, this time, comes from Bahrain and is surrounded by two young Saudis. All wield their passports. The end is the same: they step on their passport, torn and burned it.

Although there are no data available to show how many foreign fighters have been convinced by the call of ISIS for its appeal as an Islamic “State”, the video on passports still proves the importance acknowledged to the citizenship so much to devote to it different videos and appeals.

On the other side, as a response to the attractive power of ISIS, however, there have also been States that have decided to deny citizenship also to documented long-term residents to punish deviant or illegal behaviour, and, in particular, terrorism. Some countries have proposed, and some have already adopted, provisions on grounds of which suspects of terrorism would be deprived of their citizenship. On 22 November 2015, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu put forward a motion to allow the country's government to withdraw citizenship of those who join the Islamic State. “Whoever joins ISIS will not be an Israeli citizen. And if he leaves the borders of the state, he will not return. I think this lesson is becoming increasingly clear throughout the international arena, and it is fitting that we lead this effort as well,” Netanyahu said.<sup>60</sup> In early December, the authorities of Dagestan proposed to the Russian Duma to amend the country's citizenship law to deprive of citizenship those who “left Russia to take part in terrorist activities”. Moreover, those who act or acted against Russian peace-keeping or military forces and obstructed them in the discharge of their duties during international, inter-territorial or other armed conflicts, will also forfeit their citizenship. One more cause for citizenship revocation is committing terrorist acts against Russian na-

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59 L. S. Battaglia, “Tarantino Style Jihad 3.0: l'apocalisse mediale del nuovo fondamentalismo”, A. Zaccuri (ed.), *Il tablet e la mezzaluna: Islam e media al tempo del meticcio* (Padova: Marsilio, 2016).

60 See H. Keinon, “Netanyahu: Israelis joining ISIS will lose citizenship”, *The Jerusalem Post*, November 23, 2015.

tionals, embassies, missions and their employees abroad. According to lawmakers, the bill is aimed at enhancing the national security.<sup>61</sup> Similar initiative has also resonated in the Belgian public discourse, where the Flemish nationalist party NVA, argues for amendments to citizenship law to allow the deprivation of nationality to descendants of Belgian citizens (second and third generations) convicted of terrorism. Australia has moved to strip dual nationals who “have fought in government-designated militant groups or engaged in activities that would support terrorism, such as training, recruitment, or making donations” already in June 2015 when it adopted the Allegiance to Australia bill. In December 2015, the bill was amended and leads to automatic loss of Australian citizenship for individuals suspected of terrorism who are 14 years or older, even in the absence of conviction.<sup>62</sup> The parliament of Azerbaijan amended the country's citizenship law on 4 December 2017 to withdraw citizenship of those involved in terrorist activity and actions aimed at the violent change of the constitutional system of Azerbaijan. Under the new rules, such individuals will be automatically deprived of Azerbaijani citizenship.

These hard-nosed, repressive tactics, however, have not been accompanied by an equally significant preventive approach in some countries like Italy, where any program or strategy aimed towards counter-radicalization or de-radicalization wasn't developed<sup>63</sup> but has focus mainly on expulsions. In 2017 the expulsions ordered by decree of the Minister of the Interior for security reasons were 105, compared to 66 in 2016.

From a national security perspective, they promise to be a quick way to get rid of suspected terrorists. In this respect, Italy stands out in Europe. In fact, the country has made extensive use of expulsions of foreign suspects in counter-terrorism, especially in the last two years.<sup>64</sup> All deportees are allegedly related to Islamist ideology. The vast

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61 See also RAPSİ, Russia Legal Information Agency, *Russian lawmakers propose stripping of citizenship for terrorism*, December, 4, 2015.

62 See also Vice News, *Australia Moves to Strip Suspected Terrorists of Citizenship—So Long As They're Dual Citizens*, December, 4, 2015.

63 See L. Vidino, *L'Italia e il terrorismo in casa: che fare?* (Milano: Epoké-ISPI, 2016).

64 F. Marone, *The Use of Deportation in Counter-Terrorism: Insights from the Italian Case* (The Hague: ICCT, 2017).

majority come from North Africa and the Balkans. Actually, administrative deportations have become a key element of Italy's counter-terrorism policy. According to various security and terrorism experts,<sup>65</sup> the extensive use of this tool, associated with restrictive citizenship laws, represents an important factor to explain why Italy has thus far escaped terrorist violence. In Italy, the measure of deportation can be potentially used against a large number of individuals. In fact, many extremists, including home-grown jihadists who were born or grew up in the country, may not have citizenship and could therefore be subject to deportation (on the contrary, Italian nationals cannot be expelled). The behaviours that lead to a deportation order do not need to be connected to the use of terrorist violence: many non-EU citizens were expelled from Italy because, for example, they had displayed extremist attitudes or paid tribute to jihadist organisations.

Moreover, according to Marone,<sup>66</sup> given Italy's long history of confronting domestic terrorism (such as the Red Brigades in the 1970s and early 1980s) and sophisticated criminal organizations (in particular, the Sicilian Mafia, the 'Ndrangheta and the Camorra),<sup>67</sup> Italian authorities developed skills and legal tools that are useful in confronting jihadist terrorism. Additionally, over the last few years, Italian lawmakers have passed various laws aimed at strengthening the country's already extensive counterterrorism legislation, and adapting it to the current threat. In general, Italy gives priority to the criminal justice system in its approach to counter-terrorism, as Italian authorities have ample powers to conduct lengthy surveillance operations and preemptive raids. Two antiterrorism laws, adopted in 2005 and in 2015, in addition, expanded the hypotheses for the administrative deportation of non-EU citizens. In particular, the antiterrorism law adopted in July 2005 (Law No. 155/2005), soon after the attacks in London, grants the Minister of the Interior or, upon delegation, the Prefect the

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65 L. Vidino, F. Marone, E. Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbour: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West* (ISPI/PoE-GWU/ICCT-The Hague, 2017).

66 F. Marone, *The Use of Deportation in Counter-Terrorism: Insights from the Italian Case* (The Hague: ICCT, 2017).

67 F. Marone, "The Italian Way of Counterterrorism: From a Consolidated Experience to an Integrated Approach", S. N. Romaniuk et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 479ff.

power to order the deportation of a foreign citizen against whom, in particular, there are “well-founded reasons to believe that his/her stay in the territory of the State may in any way facilitate terrorist organizations or activities, at the national or international level” (Art. 3). As Marone explains, “this law provides that the deportation order can be suspended or even revoked if, in practice, the affected individual agrees to collaborate with the authorities”.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, a new antiterrorism law adopted in April 2015 (Law No. 43/2015), after the attacks in Paris, expanded the hypotheses for the administrative deportation of a foreign citizen, by order of the Prefect, for reasons of “social dangerousness”. This law also expressly refers to the category of (non-Italian) aspiring foreign fighters. The provision — states Marone — “fits with the discipline of personal preventive measures that are already applied to many suspects. Ultimately, administrative deportation represents a discretionary act of the executive (or its representatives on the territory). The deportation order is not subject to prior judicial validation on the merits and is immediately enforceable. The decision can be appealed before the administrative court (*Tribunale Amministrativo Regionale, TAR*), but its execution cannot be suspended. The deportation implies a no-re-entry for a period of time determined on a case-by-case basis (for example, in a few recent cases, as many as 15 years). It is important to note that the removal (*allontanamento*) of any foreign citizen for reasons of security, by order of the Ministry of the Interior, is regulated by different norms (in particular, Legislative Decree No. 30/2007), more favourable for the affected individual, and is subject to judicial validation”.

Administrative deportations are often ordered when evidence against an individual is deemed insufficient for prosecution, but sufficient enough to determine that he/she may pose a threat to national security.<sup>69</sup> According to experts,<sup>70</sup> the wide use of this tool represents an important factor in maintaining low levels of radicalization in the

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68 F. Marone, *The Use of Deportation in Counter-Terrorism: Insights from the Italian Case* (The Hague: ICCT, 2017).

69 F. Marone, *The Use of Deportation in Counter-Terrorism: Insights from the Italian Case* (ICCT-The Hague, March 2017).

70 F. Marone, L. Vidino, *The Jihadist Threat in Italy: A Primer* (Milano: ISPI, 2017).



country, as the use of fast-track deportations can help prevent the formation of extremist networks on national territory.

Obviously, the measure of administrative deportation is not exempt from risks and shortcomings. According to Marone,<sup>71</sup> one of the main expert in Italy on the issue, we can distinguish two main types of problem. The first is of a legal nature and is associated, in particular, with the question of human rights protection. The second is pragmatic and concerns possible counterproductive consequences, from a counter-terrorism perspective. As regards the first type of problem, the measure of administrative deportation is imposed upon a suspect without the procedural guarantees associated with criminal prosecution, including prior judicial review, appropriate standard of proof and assessment of evidence, and full compliance with the principle of the presumption of innocence. In addition, the expulsion can result in violations of human rights in the country of destination.<sup>72</sup>

In this regard, in recent years, the European Court of Human Rights has reasserted, also in relation to an influential case from Italy,<sup>73</sup> in 2008, the prohibition on sending individuals to States in which they face a “real risk” of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment. In this respect, it is worth noting that today a significant number of Italy's terrorism-related deportations concern suspects from the Balkans, where there is supposed to be little risk of torture.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, at the global level, deportations may run the risk of turning into a simple buck-passing action, that transfers an alleged problem from one State to another, without solving it. On the second point, the issue of citizenship is massively raised on expulsions: because the assumption is that if some of the suspects had had the citizenship they could not have been expelled, and it involves especially

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71 F. Marone, *The Use of Deportation in Counter-Terrorism: Insights from the Italian Case* (The Hague: ICCT, 2017).

72 L. Masera, “Il terrorismo e le politiche migratorie: sulle espulsioni dello straniero sospettato di terrorismo”, *Terrorismo Internazionale, Politiche della Sicurezza, Diritti Fondamentali*, Gli speciali di Questione Giustizia, settembre 2016, pp. 76ff.

73 F. De Londras, “Saadi vs Italy: European Court of Human Rights Reasserts the Absolute Prohibition on Refoulement in Terrorism Extradition Cases”, *Insights*, 12, 9 (May 13, 2008).

74 See also M. Abrams, “Italy deters terrorism with tough citizenship, deportation policies”, *Stars and Stripes*, October, 14, 2016.

the second generation that if became citizens they could not be expelled. But at the same time, we can not consider the implication of a restrictive citizenship law and of double standard applicable for deportations risking, as a counterproductive consequence, their radicalization.

### 7. Can jihadism be the answer?

In the 1990s the association of immigration and crime and security mostly concerned Albanians, at the time the most numerous immigrant group in Italy. As a result of this stigmatization, Albanians chose an assimilation strategy of integration.<sup>75</sup> Subsequently —after 9/11 and a visible growing Muslim presence in Italy— feelings of hostility, partly fuelled by commentators, writers and journalists, were directed towards this specific group. In most surveys of the media, the predominant image of Islam is that of a threat to security, culture and basic Western values. Then it was the turn of the Roma (and, by extension through ignorance, Romanians in general), as a result of some violent episodes involving some of them, pounced upon by the press and leading to outright attacks on some of their settlements.<sup>76</sup>

In recent years, partly as a result of the economic crisis, general racism has grown against the vast category of “immigrants” without any distinction between new arrivals and those already settled, some even holding Italian citizenship. The situation has deteriorated in the last years, findings a new target in refugees and asylum-seekers. In this context, the proclamation of the Islamic State and the attacks carried out by its adherents have shone the racism spotlight again on the “Muslims” issue, re-activating the barely-forgotten Muslim-terrorism and immigrant-terrorism relationships. Indeed, hostility towards immigrants overlaps with animosity shown towards Islamic extremism, justified by accusations of disloyalty towards the countries where numerous, variegated Islamic communities reside, constituting an internal enemy threatening to perpetrate violent attacks against their host countries.

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<sup>75</sup> V. Romania, *Farsi passare per italiani. Strategie di mimetismo sociale* (Roma: Carocci, 2004).

<sup>76</sup> Among them, the most notorious example was the burning of the Roma camp in Continassa, Turin, in 2011.

Since summer 2014, with the proclamation of the Islamic State and the first decapitations of Western citizens, national media have repeated the same mistake as they had made after 9/11, using double standards and generalizations and thereby helping to fuel fear and hostility. One headline after another warned of the potential presence in Italy of what the press termed “the terrorists next door,” creating a climate of fear in public opinion. Specifically, there was increasing attention on this topic and a growing number of articles dealing with Islam and Muslim communities in an accusatory, aggressive, attacking tone. The Pulitzer Prize winner, Glen Greenwald, commenting on coverage of the January, 2015, Paris attacks, notes that: “It’s absolutely the really scary climate that has emerged in the wake of Paris, an extremely anti-Muslim strain of animosity that we’ve seen historically in the past and that is both ugly and really dangerous”.<sup>77</sup> Italian newspaper *Libero* got sued because of its headline “Bastardi Islamici” (Muslim Bastards), published after the attack to *Charlie Hebdo*. Television news programmes, newspapers and magazines play –sometimes contradictory– variations on the Muslims-terrorists, Islam-terrorism theme. In particular, many headlines screamingly demanded that Italian Muslim communities should take a stand against terrorists and terrorism, almost as a provocation or necessity to defend themselves against the public accusation of complicity by collective responsibility or connivance with terrorist activity. Less publicity was given, however, to campaigns promoted in various Italian cities, like, *Not in My Name*, where they explicitly distance themselves, by word and deed, on the part of prominent representatives and spokespersons from Italian Muslim communities.

It was regularly underlined that the lack of integration and the discrimination-emphasized, also by the media-can feed fundamentalism and that the construction of stereotypes and generalizations can lead, as a response to discrimination, racism and Islamophobia, perceived and experienced, to the formation of reactive identities and the risk of radicalization. As stated by a representative of the Milan Islamic Association: “Fundamentalism occupies a small space which grows with injustice: the more injustice grows, the more this space

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<sup>77</sup> Media Diversity Institute, Paris Attacks: What the Media Could Have Done Differently, November, 24 2015.

grows because it fuels fundamentalist ideas. What I mean is this: when there are feelings like Islamophobia accompanied by, say, an attack in the newspapers, the mass media, prejudices et cetera against Islam and Muslims...when the Muslim, for example, is investigated and “black-listed” only because he is a Muslim, he feels under attack and his calm, responsible, civil tone begins to crack. That is where cultural aggressiveness, the aggressiveness of prejudices, grows; where there is a risk of feeding integralism, even within the community”.<sup>78</sup>

Incidents of violent fundamentalism, along with the sensationalist approach of the media to the issue, are a likely risk of fuelling exploitation, populist tendencies and of giving support to forms of anti-Islam political propaganda, and anti-immigration feeling in general, at the local level, which may, in turn, hinder the process of integration and the commitment of the associations on the ground to the recognition of their rights. “Let’s say that in my opinion rather than revealing changes in attitude we have witnessed the usual exploitation, when we see phenomena of this type. Obviously, they then become part of the public political discourse of groups who use them to try to deny some rights. We are specifically engaged in a campaign on behalf of freedom of worship, the possibility of setting up official religious spaces, a campaign which we have been conducting for some time. All this talk about ISIS use as a polemical political argument of those who were against [...]”.<sup>79</sup>

ISIS and the series of attacks in Europe have therefore not played in favour of Muslims and the recognition of their presence in the public space and, consequently, of the enjoyment of rights, but have contributed to increase prejudices, suspicions and forms of Islamophobia that, amplified by the mass media, risk to determine or increase, especially among young people, the dynamics of rejection, social isolation, resentment that can lead to adherence to extremist messages and radicalization processes in reaction to a situation that is no longer judged bearable.

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78 Interview made in October 2015. See also S. Coglievina, V. Premazzi, “L’Islam in Italia di fronte al fondamentalismo violento”, M. Diez, A. Plebani (eds.), *La galassia fondamentalista tra jihad armato e partecipazione politica* (Padova: Marsilio, 2015), pp. 126ff.

79 Representative, Coordinamento Associazioni Islamiche Milano, interview by the author, October 2015.

If it is true that radicalization (and all Italian foreign fighters who have left for Syria and Iraq confirm this) has multiple causes, not only discrimination and the perception of refusal, and can engage in weaknesses, sometimes even personal ones, of individuals who end up embracing religious practices far from their family experiences, radical and irreconcilable visions with the context of life until joining international jihadism, because in search of “meaning” for their own life and belonging to a community,<sup>80</sup> it is also, however, important not to create “people under surveillance” or second-class citizens, who must prove to be devoted to Islam and good citizens.<sup>81</sup>

Exclusion and difficulty in becoming citizens, in being recognized with the same rights together with certain security measures such as expulsions can therefore worsen this perception and lead to the risk of forms of radicalization and violent extremism. The fact that the citizenship reform wasn't approved risks to have the undesirable effect of intensifying the feelings of frustration and anger and even the sense of revenge, at the individual level and not only for Muslims as it affected second generations of all origins and religions, forcing them to find an alternative to the feeling of belonging to the state they were born in but where they still feel and are excluded.

The best among the possible endings, which is already taking place significantly, is a new migration, often following the acquisition of citizenship, years after the first submission of the application, to other European countries. The worst is, as repeatedly pointed out, the development of forms of reactive identity that can activate radicalization processes and up to join terrorism groups. The path of the citizenship reform continues to seem not an easy one, despite the promises of various representatives of the national institutions, but at the same time it is increasingly needed because the lack of recognition is a time bomb that could sooner or later burst into our hands and then we could only say that “soon was yesterday” as the slogan of one of the citizen-

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80 V. Premazzi, “Oltre la motivazione socio-economica, il fascino del Califfato tra i giovani figli di immigrati in Europa”, A. Pin, C. Pellegrino (eds.), *Europa e Islam attualità di una relazione* (Padova: Marsilio, 2016), pp. 66ff.

81 See also S. Coglievina, V. Premazzi, “L'Islam in Italia di fronte al fondamentalismo violento”, M. Diez, A. Plebani (eds.), *La galassia fondamentalista tra jihad armato e partecipazione politica* (Padova: Marsilio, 2015), pp. 126ff.

ship reform national campaigns.<sup>82</sup> Finally, it is also important to underline how it was pointed out by L. Guglielminetti, Italian expert of the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) of the European Commission, that the anti-terrorism strategy, to be effective, must therefore be more complex and articulated than relying only on restrictions and deportations and that it is of fundamental importance to ensure the possession and protection of the rights in counterterrorism laws and strategies.<sup>83</sup>

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82 See also V. Premazzi, *Ius soli* (#SenatoRisponDi), Amico Missioni Consolata, November 18, 2016.

83 L. Guglielminetti, “Fine legislatura senza ius soli ne lotta alla radicalizzazione. Il perché”, *Homme révolté*, January 10, 2018.

## **Media and Violence in Europe: The case of growing Islamophobia in Italy**

*Ines Peta*

The goal of this study is to determine the possible factors leading to increased anti-Muslim sentiment in Italy. Islamophobia is a phenomenon that has barely been studied in this country. Therefore there is a manifest lack of data on Islamophobic incidents.

Nevertheless some recent surveys give a glimpse into the extent of the phenomenon and some interesting reports, such as European Islamophobia Reports published by SETA Foundation, address this topic. We begin by examining first anti-Muslim attitudes in the United States and Europe through a secondary analysis of two recent Pew Research Center surveys in order to underline the common demographic predictors of Islamophobia. We then analyze the specific case of Italy and the potential relationship between exposure to negative news about Muslim-related issues and attitudes toward Muslims in this country.

### **1. Preliminary definition**

The term Islamophobia was first used in 1922 by the French scholar Étienne Dinet, but fell into disregard until the 1990s.

Generally speaking, it is a word that indicates a dislike of Islam and Muslims from a secular Western perspective.<sup>1</sup> However, there are no clear cut global recognized definition for it.

Etymologically, the term suggests an irrational fear (phobia) of Islam, but it is evident that dislike or hostility toward Muslims or the Islamic religion is not Islamophobic in the literal (and psychiatric) sense of the word.

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<sup>1</sup> On the definition of Islamophobia and on its controversial relationship with the concept of anti-Semitism, see in particular M. Bunzl, "Between Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Some Thoughts on the New Europe", *American Ethnologist*, 32, 4 (2005), pp. 499-508; B. Krondorfer, "Introduction: Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Twins or Category Mistake?", *CrossCurrents*, 63, 3 (2015), pp. 292-296; J. Renton, B. Gidley (eds.), *Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe: a Shared Story?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Furthermore, the sources and causes of hatreds, fears and discriminatory practices towards Muslims cannot easily be determined. Are they primarily religious in nature or social and political? Are they the product of modernity or go back to the eleventh century Christian crusades against Muslims? Such ambiguity, however, does not change the social reality of fears, prejudices, discrimination or hostility that Muslim people experience and in which Islamic religion plays the major role, especially after 9/11. Certainly the word Islamophobia is imperfect, but the numerous and differentiated manifestations of prejudice cannot be easily captured in a short definition. So by Islamophobia we refer to a wide and differentiated variety of discriminatory and exclusionary practices and stigmatizing definitions of Muslims and Islam.

## **2. The common predictors of Islamophobia**

A Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2017 asked Americans to rate members of nine religious groups (Jews, Muslims, Catholics, mainline Protestants, evangelical Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Mormons) on a “feeling thermometer” from 0 to 100, where 0 reflects the most negative rating and 100 the most positive.

Overall, Americans gave Muslims an average rating of 48 degrees. They view more warmly the seven other religious groups.

The survey shows that anti-Muslim attitudes are closely linked to political party. Republicans and those who lean toward the Republican Party gave Muslims an average rating of 39, considerably colder than Democrats' rating toward Muslims (56). Other demographic factors, especially education and age, are associated with views toward Muslims. Younger respondents and Americans with college degrees give warmer ratings to Muslims compared with older respondents and those who have less education. It is also worthwhile to mention that fewer than half of Americans say they personally know a Muslim (45%). Those who do not know Muslims rate this group on the colder side of the scale, but those who do know someone who is a Muslim rate this group on the warmer side.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Americans Express Increasingly Warm Feelings Toward Religious Groups* (2017).



Another Pew Research Center survey conducted in the spring of 2016 in 10 European countries shows that half or more in Hungary (72%), Italy (69%), Poland (66%), Greece (65%) and Spain (50%) have a very or somewhat unfavorable view of Muslims. And in Italy (36%), Hungary (35%) and Greece (32%), roughly a third hold very unfavorable opinions. Majorities in the other nations surveyed (Netherlands, Sweden, France, Germany, UK) express positive attitudes about Muslims. Nonetheless, at least a quarter in each country have negative views of Muslims. The survey shows that also in Europe negative attitudes toward Muslims are strongly associated with political conservatism: people who place themselves on the right side of the ideological scale are much more likely than those on the left to see Muslims negatively. In many countries, older people and those with less education are more negative toward Muslims. This survey did not ask whether respondents know Muslims personally. However, the results show that in countries where the Muslim presence is higher, the perception of Muslims is more positive.<sup>3</sup>

The common and most consistent demographic predictors of Islamophobia on both sides of the Atlantic therefore seems to be political ideology, age, education and social contact between majority populations and Muslim minorities. It is interesting to note that the result of our analysis confirms the data of a former study based on previous surveys and polls.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Islamophobia in Italy

In Italy, as in the rest of Europe, Islamophobia seems to be strictly linked to the growing refugee crisis and the frequent terrorist attacks. People's sense of insecurity, certainly present at least since 11 September 2001, seems to have increased recently following the attacks which occurred in Paris in 2015. For this reason, we analyze the growing Islamophobia in Italy starting from that year until today.

In a survey carried out in November 2015, 58% of respondents said they had a negative impression of Islam, 27% of which very neg-

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3 The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs* (2016).

4 C. Ogan, L. Willnat, R. Pennington, M. Bashir, "The rise of anti-Muslim prejudice: Media and Islamophobia in Europe and the United States", *The International Communication Gazette*, 76, 1 (2014), pp. 27-46.

ative and 31% quite negative. Furthermore, 16% of respondents blamed Islam as a whole for the attacks that took place in Paris.<sup>5</sup>

The Euro-barometer on discrimination 2015 shows that 39% of Italian respondents say they would be uncomfortable working with a Muslim person. This is higher than for any other religious group. Moreover, less than half of the Italian respondents (41%) would feel at ease if one of their children were in a love relationship with a Muslim person.<sup>6</sup>

The 2016 Pew Research Center survey mentioned above shows that in all 10 European countries surveyed, people who have a more negative view of Muslims are also much more concerned about the threat of refugees. When it comes to defining the specific threat from refugees, Europeans perceive the possibility of domestic terrorism and a negative economic impact as bigger concerns than crime. In Italy 65% of respondents say that refugees are a burden because they take away jobs and social benefits (only 21% take the opposite view that refugees' economic contributions make their country stronger) and 60% believe that they increase the likelihood of terrorism (only 28% believe, on the contrary, that refugees will not increase the chance of domestic terrorist attacks).<sup>7</sup>

The 2017 Demos report on security in Italy and Europe confirms the link immigration/terrorism and immigration/economic disadvantages, documenting a growing fear of the foreigner. The report shows that in Italy 39% of respondents see the immigrant as a threat to national security and public safety, 36% as a threat to employment, emphasizing that both indicators have increased by about 5 points compared to 2016 and provide the highest values recorded since 2007 up to today.<sup>8</sup>

A survey conducted by the Chatham House Europe Program between December 2016 and January 2017 shows that 51% of respondents in Italy agreed to the statement "All further migration from

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5 Demos & Pi, *Gli attentati di Parigi*, available online as pdf.

6 Special Euro-Barometer 437, *Discriminations in the EU in 2015*.

7 The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs*, pp. 30-31.

8 Demos & Pi, *X Rapporto sulla sicurezza e l'insicurezza sociale in Italia e in Europa (2017)*, available online as pdf.

mainly Muslim countries should be stopped”.<sup>9</sup> The Ipsos Perils of Perception Survey 2016 found that the current and the future Muslim Population are enormously overestimated in Europe. The average guess in Italy is that 20% of the population are Muslim and 31% will be Muslim in 2020, while the current percentage is 3.7% (17% overestimation) and the projection for 2020 is 4.9% (26% overestimation).<sup>10</sup> Connecting these data to each other, we can suggest that this overestimation is linked to unfavorable views regarding Muslims, connected in turn with the perceived negative impact of migrants on economy and security.

#### 4. The role of media

The 2015 and 2016 European Islamophobia Reports published by SETA Foundation documented several Islamophobic incidents in various sectors of the Italian society, such as education, employment, politics, media, cyberspace and judiciary system.<sup>11</sup> In this paper we focus on the media sector, which in our opinion has played and continues to play a decisive role in spreading Islamophobia. In recent years two issues have dominated the media agenda: the link between terrorism and immigration and the economic and social costs from immigration; according to the above mentioned surveys, both these issues have gradually become a major source of concern for Italians.

Our analysis will focus on the first issue, as it targets specifically Muslim migrants rather than migrants in general. Before discussing in detail the presence of the migration-Islam-terrorism nexus in the Italian media, however, it is useful to start from a general analysis of some problematic words used by Western media. This issue was recently the subject of the UNESCO paper *Terrorism and the Media: A Handbook for Journalists*.<sup>12</sup>

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9 Chatham House Europe Program, *What Do Europeans Think About Muslim Immigration?* (2017), available online as pdf.

10 Ipsos-Mori, *Perils of Perceptions 2016*, available online as pdf.

11 G. A. Siino, N. Levantino, “Islamophobia in Italy, National Report 2015”, *European Islamophobia Report 2015*, E. Bayrakli, F. Hafez (eds.) (Istanbul: SETA, 2015); C. Giacalone, “Islamophobia in Italy. National Report 2016”, *European Islamophobia Report 2016*, E. Bayrakli, F. Hafez (eds.) (Istanbul: SETA, 2016).

12 UNESCO, *Terrorism and the Media: A Handbook for Journalists* (2017).

In his famous book *Covering Islam*, E. Said showed that the Western media were considering Islam as a kind of scapegoat for everything unpleasant that was happening in the Muslim world and he identified a series of words-container-useful to direct the public opinion-to illustrate these “pre-judgments” in the media, such as *Islam, nation, democracy, Christianity*.<sup>13</sup> Said's reflection was based primarily on the experience of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the incident involving 52 Americans held captive for many days in the US embassy in Tehran in January 1981. Therefore it was influenced by the historical events of that period. In an interesting analysis, L. S. Battaglia wonders: “if Said were to rewrite this essay today which words would he focus on? In other words, talking to the Western media, which are the empty shells which immediately resonate with meaning and guide public opinion towards a precise reading of the facts of international news?”. In her opinion, the words used to transfer bias in the media, in the narrative of the Middle East, are: *Islam, terrorism, fundamentalism, sectarianism, jihad, Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda* and, most recently, *Islamic* as an adjective associated with *State*.<sup>14</sup> We focus on *Islam, fundamentalism, terrorism* and *jihad/jihadism*, as these appear to be the central keywords whose characterization has a decisive influence on the specification of all others.

As for the term *Islam*, it is undeniable that even today all the political, social, economic and cultural shortcomings of Muslim societies are hitched together and to Islam with a capital “I”. Islam then becomes the source and the prime mover of all contemporary history in a vast and differentiated territory that extends from the Philippines to Morocco and from Scandinavia, if we take account of Muslim minorities in Europe, to South Africa. As Mohammed Arkoun clearly explained, it is true that the sort of Islamic discourse common to the various Islamic movements defined as “fundamentalists” proposes the powerful image of a single, eternal Islam, the ideal model for historic action to liberate the world from the Western, imperialistic, materialist model. But it is also true that “Western media seize up this monolithic

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13 E. Said, *Covering Islam: how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

14 L. S. Battaglia, “Bias in the media: covering Islam after 9/11” (2016).

view and transpose it into a discourse suitable to the social imaginary of Western countries” without any critical inter-mediation from the social, historical and religious sciences.<sup>15</sup>

Western reporting about terrorist attacks, for example, almost always notes a connection to Islam. But it often ends there. As Philip Seib points out, “many journalists shy away from religious topics, and this creates a vacuum of public knowledge that leads to defining a religion of 1.6 billion people by the acts of the few who spill blood in a Manchester arena or a Baghdad marketplace. And because there is such limited understanding of Islam in the non-Muslim world, many news consumers are prone to accept the idea that Islam=equals-terrorism”. After all, Islam usually disappears from the news until the next tragedy.<sup>16</sup>

When journalists want to differentiate within Islam, they usually just talk about “moderate” Islam or “moderate” Muslims, but these expressions implicitly suggest that Islam is generally and essentially not “moderate”. A few examples in the Italian media: “#NotInMyName: la campagna social dei musulmani moderati” (#NotInMyName: the social campaign of moderate Muslims, *La Repubblica*); “C’è un Islam moderato amico delle donne e della democrazia” (There is a moderate Islam friendly with women and democracy, *Il Corriere*); “L’Islam non è moderato ma molti musulmani sì”, (Islam is not moderate but many Muslims are, *La Stampa*).

Moreover, as Laura Silvia Battaglia writes, “[...] to be serious, moderate Islam does not exist in the sense that there exists a historical traditional Islam in the context of which what is defined as radical/political Islam of the Wahhabi and the successive Salafi type, is considered by traditional Islam a crystallized and literal interpretation of the Qur’an”.<sup>17</sup>

*Fundamentalism* is another wrong category applied to Islam; the term was created in the 1920s in the United States to designate Protestant Christians and in the years between 1920 and 1978 the category “fundamentalist” was almost never used except in reference to

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15 M. Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam, Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p. 7.

16 Philip Seib, *Superficial, Speculative, Breathless: Outdated Terrorism Reporting Must Change* (2017).

17 L. S. Battaglia, “Bias in the media: covering Islam after 9/11” (2016).

them. This began to change in 1979 when the Iranian revolution deposed the Shah. Starting with that event, Muslims have been and continue to be characterized as fundamentalists with great frequency, to the point that the term is today used almost exclusively to refer to Muslims. Leaving aside the discussions on the correctness of the term to define the variegated galaxy of extremist movements,<sup>18</sup> it is undeniable that the word *fundamentalism*, like the word *terrorism*, is now frequently associated with the adjective *Islamic*.

Fundamentalism and terrorism are thus regularly identified as essentially “Islamic”, thus connecting Islam as a whole to the actions of those who claim to follow it to wage their war. However, usually no one classifies as “Christian” or “Western” terrorism the violent actions of white supremacists and far-right extremists like the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik.

Another word often abused by the media is *jihadism*.

This term is increasingly used, if only to avoid using the expression “Islamic terrorist”. However, the word *jihad* means “effort”, not “holy war”, and it appears 41 times in the Qur’an, often in the idiomatic expression “effort on the path to God” (*al-jihad fi sabil Allah*). This effort can be peaceful or warlike, but it cannot be identified with the narrow and aggressive concept of *jihad* used by terrorists.<sup>19</sup> By focusing on the latter, the Western media has inadvertently reinforced the link between terrorism and Islam within the Western consciousness and contributed to the negative perception of Islam held by an increasing percentage of the Western public.

## 5. Islamophobia in Italian media

As 2015 European Islamophobia Report points out, after the attacks in Paris in January and November, some newspaper, such as *Il*

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18 On this term and on its meaning in Arabic, see P. Maggolini, “Il fondamentalismo islamico: mille volti che guardano un'unica verità”, *La galassia fondamentalista tra jihad armato e partecipazione politica*, A. Plebani, M. Díez (eds.) (Venezia: Marsilio, 2015), pp. 26-39.

19 See the interesting analysis of A. Asfaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God, Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also I. Peta, “Alle fonti del jihad: guerra santa o sforzo pacifico sulla via di Dio?”, *La galassia fondamentalista tra jihad armato e partecipazione politica*, pp. 40-49.

*Giornale* and *Libero*, have been very critical of Muslims.<sup>20</sup> In the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack against French journalists in January, for example, the newspaper *Il Giornale* issued the headline: “Macellai Islamici” (Islamic Butchers), referring to these events in terms of a clash of civilizations and associating terrorism with migration. Similarly, after the events in Paris in November 2015, the magazine *Libero* issued its frontpage headline: “Bastardi Islamici” (Islamic Bastards). Inaccuracy and misrepresentation have also been features of the way in which certain media have been reporting the news.<sup>21</sup>

The following European Islamophobia Report noted in 2016 an increase of 2% of titles related to anxiety caused by the so-called Daesh followers in Italy and Europe compared to the previous year, pointing out that all titles/articles related to this category established a connection between immigration and terrorism. In addition, following the New Year's Eve assaults on women in Cologne, the report documents caused several distortion of data and racist interpretations of the events, as well as very superficial and stigmatizing media discussions on the identity of migrants, and in particular of Arabs.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most discussed analyses was the one written by Maurizio Molinari, director of the newspaper *La Stampa*. He defined the “group assault on women in Cologne” as “a tribal act that originates from the implosion of the Arab states in North Africa and the Middle East”, implosion that “brings back tribes and clans as elements of aggregation, enhancing primordial forms of violence”. In this way, he established a link between North African/Middle Eastern culture-reduced to an atavistic tribalism-and violence against women, generalizing the culture of violence as a basis of identity for Arab migrants and refugees. Furthermore, several Italian newspapers reported an interview given by an imam in Cologne to a Russian TV.

During this interview, the imam stated that the victims of the New Year's Eve violent acts in that city, were themselves responsible for their sexual assault because they were dressing inappropriately and wearing perfume. However, there was no established connection

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20 G. A. Siino, N. Levantino, “Islamophobia in Italy, National Report 2015”, p. 282.

21 G. A. Siino, N. Levantino, “Islamophobia in Italy, National Report 2015”, p. 283.

22 C. Giacalone, “Islamophobia in Italy, National Report 2016”, p. 310.

between the events occurred that night and the statement of that imam, called in many titles “the imam of Cologne”, even if there are countless imams in the city. A few examples: “L'imam di Colonia: gli stupri colpa del profumo delle vostre donne” (The Imam of Cologne: The rapes are caused by your women's perfume, *Il Giornale*); “Donne profumate, hanno provocato: la frase choc dell'imam di Colonia, indignazione globale” (Scented women have provoked: the shocking statement of the Imam of Cologne, global indignation, *Liberio*); “L'imam sugli attacchi di Colonia: Donne svestite e con un profumo che istigava” (The imam on the Cologne attacks: Women half-naked and with a perfume that instigated, *Il Corriere*). This contributed to create a connection in the mind of readers between violence and religious identity of migrants, namely Islamic religion.

This Islam-violence-migration link seems to be a growing dangerous trend. The 2017 Carta di Roma Report on Media and Immigration noted an increase of 20% of alarmist tones in dealing with the migration phenomenon compared to the previous year and emphasizes that religion has taken a major role in defining the foreigner. The report identifies 146 titles/articles on the front-page of the newspapers *Liberio*, *Il Giornale* and *La Verità* that are discriminatory and contain dangerous speech, because they establish a link between ethnic/racial/religious affiliation and negative or dangerous behaviors. 20% of these articles can be associated with the religious factor.<sup>23</sup> The report also notes that in the prime time Broadcasting news, Islam in 2017 was present in 4% of journalistic reports and in 6 out of 10 reports the meaning associated with it was negative.<sup>24</sup>

More generally, the media discourse on Islam and immigration is ideologically oriented, primarily focusing on migratory flows' management and people's security and reporting the opinions of political actors on these issues, while the voice of the protagonists (immigrants, Muslims) is almost completely absent.<sup>25</sup>

The lack of migrants/Muslims voices in the media has several negative consequences; above all others, it paves the way to the use of

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23 P. Barretta, G. Milazzo, *Notizie da paura*. Quinto rapporto Carta di Roma 2017, pp. 11-12, 20-21.

24 P. Barretta, G. Milazzo, *Notizie da paura*, p. 12.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 20-25, 48-49.



biased categorizations and a dehumanizing language that inevitably impact the public opinion.

## 6. Conclusions

Our analysis found support for the hypothesis that Italian media have a great deal of responsibility in negative view of Muslims and Islam. In fact, the Media play a significant role in filling cultural gaps or informing the public opinion when the subject of public discourse is beyond people's direct experience,<sup>26</sup> as is the case of Italy, where Muslim immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon and Islam entered public debate only after 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks.<sup>27</sup> The influence of media seems particularly relevant on older people.<sup>28</sup> And we have found that older age, lower education and absence of social contact with Muslims, in addition to political ideology, are the most consistent demographic predictors of Islamophobia.

We believe that for Islamophobia to decline, the public needs first to challenge their assumptions about Muslims and Islam.

However, since the political debate and the media coverage of Islam and Muslims continue to describe them as the “others” and to exclude them from the resources/rights/descriptions of an alleged “we”, deconstructing and then exposing the roots of Islamophobic ideas in public discourse is still a major challenge in Italy. To this purpose, a crucial step in the right direction could be a serious reconsideration of the mainstream idea of Europe and its relationship with Islam. The history of the continent cannot be properly told without taking into account the influential role of the Muslim presence, which has touched every single country in the continent.

The common perception of Islam as alien to the other monotheistic religions and to European culture and thought is historically inaccurate. “Islam”, as a religion, was born in the wake of Judaism and

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26 See on this the recent study of M. Stone, *Snake and Stranger: Media Coverage of Muslims and Refugee Policy*, 2017: <https://shorensteincenter.org/media-coverage-muslims-refugee-policy/>.

27 I. Peta, “L'Islam in Italia e a Milano: patrimonio comune e fattori di differenziazione”, *La sfida del meticciato nella migrazione musulmana*, C. Regalia, C. Giuliani, S. G. Meda (eds.) (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2016), pp. 26-43.

28 C. Ogan, L. Willnat, R. Pennington, M. Bashir, “The rise of anti-Muslim prejudice: Media and Islamophobia in Europe and the United States”, p. 41.

Christianity and, as a driving force in the rise of the Arab and Turkish empires, took control of the Mediterranean area from the seventh to the twelfth centuries and again, with the direction of the Ottoman Turks, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. That means, in the words of Mohammed Arkoun, “the cultures of the Mediterranean region shared a single historical destiny that the scientific study of history, independent of the ideologies that divide the northern and southern or the eastern and western coasts of the Mediterranean, is far from confronting”.<sup>29</sup>

The paradoxical relationship of Europe with Muslims, who have been vastly relevant to its history but are also constantly excluded from it, is central to how the European imagination has figured them. Edward Said has shown how this “othering” has often proceeded through the contrast between the Western Europe and its Orientalism.<sup>30</sup> Despite centuries of common milestones and mutual interactions, in fact, the history of the southern and eastern coasts of the Mediterranean continues to be the domain of specialists in Arab and Turkish studies and what is taught about the Arab or Muslim countries is highly conditioned by the European, Western perspective. To fix this imbalance, it is urgent that scholars intervene to rectify historical perspectives, fill in substantial gaps and eliminate prejudices. A rediscovery of the common past in a critical way would permit scholars to explain why what we call “Islam” and “the West” stand opposed to each other as two poles of knowledge and civilization, even though they sit on the same philosophical-religious pedestal.

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29M. Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam, Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, p. 8.

30 E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

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