

It has been recently suggested that the partition of Syria was ‘an innovative solution to the ongoing Syrian crisis’, which really seems to be in a deadlock. This idea – the partition – appears to take for granted that some zones are homogeneous and could be separated from others, which would thus be different. But in what sense may they be homogeneous, and the others different? Answering this question definitely supposes a particular – and biased – way of looking at the crisis.

Is the actual conflict based on religious hatred between communities? Absolutely yes, and probably from the very beginning (March 2011), although other factors have played a detrimental role. There is indeed a long history of exclusion, and even excommunication (which goes back to Ibn Taymiyya’s fatwa, promulgated in 1305), on the part of reactionary Sunnism against the Alawi community (which is the power basis of the regime, although not exclusively since individuals and groups from other communities do take part in the system, and since many Alawites are hostages of the regime, when they are not simply virulently hostile to it). So it should not be forgotten that the Asad (father and son) regime has been regularly qualified as heretical and apostate by the most extremist salafi preachers, already in the 1970s, during the 1982 Hama insurrection, and then later on, consistently, until the almost four-year-old uprising when an extremely violent repression exacerbated already radicalized positions. It also has to be reminded that Buthayna Shaaban, the president’s political adviser, stated during the genesis of the conflict that the protests were not political but communitarian and organically prone to collective revenge, which in her view relieved the regime from any political concession and gave it a free hand in arresting, torturing, and killing dissidents.

If the religious and communitarian factors have become paramount (objectively as well as under a manipulated form), it is absolutely not the only one. Power monopoly, authoritarianism, repression, marginalization, poverty, corruption, drought, unemployment, etc., all are important factors which, when combined, have contributed to general dissatisfaction, broad unrest, and then civil war. From this point of view, the idea of partition does seem weird since where is homogeneity to be found? Maybe some well-off districts of the capital could form an independent state, separated from even the surrounding suburbs? If one were tempted to go back to the religious factor in the quest for homogeneity, in order to implement some kind of partition, the same pitfall would appear since very few areas (unless one speaks of villages, city districts, or specific tribal areas in the eastern steppe) are homogeneous from a denominational perspective. People from all creeds are indeed more or less mixed, due to the legacy of history, the state building process and economic constraints. Sunnis, Christians, and Alawites live in the same western coastal region; Damascus is a demographic patchwork; in the south coexist Sunnis (in the plains) with Druses and Christians (in the lowly elevated ‘Druse’ mountain) plus the Bedouins in the surrounding steppe; etc. Unless huge population swaps were to be implemented, which seems totally unrealistic, (religious) homogeneity will remain unreachable on a large scale. Not to mention the ethnic heterogeneity (mostly) between Arabs and Kurds, which could not be diluted without a complete redrawing of the borders and delimitation of territories.

The French mandate did try to cut Syria into slices in order to break the national feeling of resistance. But, for instance, the Alawite statelet (1920-1936, with different statutes) was contested even by the Alawites themselves. The Syrian crisis being complex, any religion-based idea of partition is doomed to (human) failure, because people are geographically

intertwined and because the problem is essentially political. Unless every small swath of land is given independence, any wide-ranging solution has to be thought through within a national framework (maybe with the exception of the Kurds, an idea that most pro- and anti-regime Arabs refuse). If it seems impossible to oblige fighting people to live together, at least as long as there is no global agreement on some kind of transitional period (with power sharing, justice, and gradual reconciliation), suggesting that adversaries should be territorially separated, on a religious basis (the most palpable yet less bright solution), will not solve the fundamental issues (security, equity, and development). Worse, this will further weaken the region, to the benefit of terrorist transnational organizations and also, probably, imperialist interests (at least for a while).

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